Cover

Running For Cover by Bad Dancer

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Summary: Overworked and underpaid, Sammy Thompson is just trying to save up enough money to send herself to college and pay her father's bills. But when her best friend's brother goes missing, she is forced to deal with monsters, government conspiracies and whatever the hell is going on between her and Jonathan. Jonathan/ OC

1. Candy Land Streets

"Dad, please sit down and eat your toast"

Sammy slid a glass of orange juice next to her father's plate of eggs and toast while trying to shove a cap over her mop of frizzy hair. She was already running behind schedule and she had to get to school.

"Turn off the lights, damnit", her dad grumbled from his room, rolling out of bed miserably. Sammy complied and switched off the hallway light, "It's bad enough you wake me up at five in the morning, the least you could do is leave it dark."

"Not my fault you have a hangover", Sammy quipped back, quickly shoving her lunch bag into her backpack, most likely smashing her sandwich and carrots into mush.

Looking at Greg Thompson, you wouldn't have expected much from him. He was wearing boxers, an old t-shirt and a bathrobe with an ugly looking five o'clock shadow gracing his jaw. He smelled like stale beer and definitely hadn't showered in at least two days. He looked like a bum, but Sammy knew her dad better than that. He was kinder than one might expect, and was just having a rough morning.

Well, every morning was a rough morning for him, but she knew why better than most.

"Dad", Sammy called out, keeping her voice low for his hangover, "I have to leave for school. Please just promise me you'll eat your breakfast."

Her father plopped down on his chair and started to play with his eggs. He pouted before shoveling a large bite of eggs into his mouth, several bits sticking to his unshaven chin. Sammy smiled and patted him on the shoulder before making her way towards the coat rack by the door and beginning to wrap herself up in several layers.

"Boss is being a real bitch at the store", he griped, shoving a runny piece of egg into his mouth.

"What did I tell you about that word, Dad?" the brunette sighed, buttoning up her second layer of flannel.

Her father sighed, not even bothering to swallow before responding. "The term 'bitch' is sexist and I should not use it to describe my female coworkers", he drawled through a mouthful of eggs, rolling his eyes. However, Sammy could see the slight traces of a smile tugging at his lips.

"That's right", she said smugly, "And besides, Joan is not that bad. You just keep showing up smelling like an ashtray."

"I'd smell more like an ashtray if you let me smoke", her father cut in, glaring good naturedly at his daughter.

"I've told you a million times", she grunted as she pulled her backpack up from its place in the corner and stepping up to the kitchen counter, "Smoking causes lung cancer."

"Wish you coulda told your momma that", Greg muttered, looking down at his eggs.

Sammy paused slightly before shoveling her a mouthful of burnt eggs into her mouth at the mentions of her mother's death. She wanted to bring herself to put on a sad face. Or, at least, sad for the right reasons.

Her father had been nearly catatonic since his wife's death three years ago. Some days were better than others. He would insist that they make the most of the day, cooking big meals and renting funny movies because he insisted that her mother would have wanted them smiling. Other days were miserable. He would cry, break things, and drink himself into a stupor, and Sammy had to make sure he got through it okay.

"I know dad", she said gently, pulling her cap lower over her brow, "And we both know she would have listened to me way before you did about the issue. Just take it easy, okay? I'll be home from school before you know it, and we'll make your favorite dinner. Black bean soup and potatoes. Is that good?"

"Steak is my favorite dinner", he retorted, smiling through a full mouth.

"Well, your second favorite dinner, then", she shot back, smirking over at him.

Her father nodded, sending Sammy a grateful smile. They both knew she was lying, though. She wouldn't be home until at least ten o'clock, probably later. She had a shift at Benny's and another at Jenny's Pizza after school, and Sammy couldn't afford to miss a day of work. They had been short on the electric bill last month, and Sammy wasn't planning on getting on the electric companies bad side.

"Have a nice day, sweetie", Greg called out kindly to his daughter as she exited the trailer they occupied. She waved back at him with a quick "You too, dad" as she ran out the door and through the lot to get to her bike.

Their small house sat isolated in an abandoned lot outside Hawkins, which gave them a large lot of land to call their own. At least they had something, right?

It was February in Hawkins, meaning it was too cold for any sane person to be biking at all, let alone five miles at five in the morning. But Sammy didn't have many options. A car was too expensive and walking was pretty much impossible, so biking it is.

To try and keep warm against the wind, Sammy wrapped herself up in a flannel shirt, a sweater and a thick jacket along with a cap and a scarf that wrapped around the bottom of her face. It was an effective method, but it had the unfortunate side effect of making her look like a human balloon.

She quickly tied her backpack to the back of her bike and mounted it. The rusty chain squeaked to life underneath her as she pushed the pedals out of their nearly frozen state and pedaled out of the lot. The wind bit into her face and wrists as she made her way through the abandoned roads, swerving past the piles of trash on the side of the half-frozen road.

Despite the cold, Sammy really did love biking to school in the mornings. The way the sun reflected off the snow, staining it pink and orange, made the whole road look like something out of Candyland.

The ride took around forty minutes, giving her a gross sheen of sweat across her brow. The Hawkins High parking lot, as usual, was littered with old cars, parents minivans and teens either making out or desperately trying to fill out the last pages of their homework. She skidded to a halt in front of the bike racks, the ice making it hard to come to a steady stop. She was just chaining up her bike when the shrill tones of Carol and Tommy gave her an instant headache.

"Now *that* is a nose job waiting to happen", she giggled as she walked up the steps with her boyfriend Tommy, "And has she ever heard of eyebrow waxing?"

Her grating giggle carried through the cold air as Sammy self consciously rubbed at her naturally mashed in nose, which was now bright red from the cold. "At least I didn't pay for mine", she grumbled under her breath.

"I'm sorry", the redhead quipped, stopping in her tracks, "What was that, sweetie?"

Sammy felt her cheeks heat up, now probably matching the redness of her nose. She ducked her head, rubbing nervously at her nose. "Nothing."

"Of course not", Carol smirked, her hair swinging behind her as she spun around and marched towards the school, her freckled boyfriend in tow.

Embarrassed, the brunette grumbled several choice words as she tugged her backpack over her shoulder and waddled into the school's hallway towards her locker, her layers still weighing her down.

She removed her cap and scarf quickly, stuffing them in her backpack. Her thick hair practically sprang out, the brown locks sticking up and out in every direction. She tried to smooth down her hair as she shoved her jackets into her locker before slamming it

shut. With all her layers safely packed away, Sammy made her way to her first period class, the only things she had to look forward to being biology and the dullness of work after school.

2. French Fries

Jonathan Byers stood patiently in the Hawkins Middle parking lot, fingers fiddling with his mom's old camera. He'd managed to snap a few decent photos, but the camera was pretty much crap, though he'd never tell his mom that. He leaned back against his car and tried cleaning off the lens with the edge of his t-shirt.

"Jonathan!"

The teen looked up from the camera lens to see Will scampering towards him, his friends in tow. A smile spread across his pale face as Jonathan stood up from the car and waved his brother over. "Hey!"

The group of middle schoolers made their way to the car. Mike and Lucas were shouting over each other in the back as Will gave his brother a quick hug.

"Hey", Jonathan chuckled, hugging his brother back, "How was your day?"

"Pretty good", Will responded, smiling up at Jonathan, "Science class wasn't the worst."

"Are you shitting me?", Dustin cut in, adjusting the cap stuck on top of his curls, "Mr. Norbury is the absolute worst teacher in the history of teachers! She's ruining my curiosity adventure."

"You need a better name for that", Lucas cut in, briefly pausing his conversation with Mike.

"Maybe curiosity voyage?", Will provided helpfully.

Dusting squinted over at the smaller boy, pressing his lips together. "Not bad. I'll take it under advisement."

Giggling, Will turned back to his brother. "Jonathan, can you be dungeon master for us this Saturday? Mike's parents are letting us use the basement for our next campaign."

"Didn't we just do this last weekend at Dustin's house?" Jonathan

inquired, trying to keep his face straight, "I'm pretty sure my shirt still smells like his cat."

"Hey", Dusting slurred, pointing his finger warningly at the older boy, "Don't drag Mews into this. He can't help his hairy nature."

Jonathan put his hands up in a little surrender gesture. "Not blaming the cat, I promise. I'm happy to do it."

Mike pushed his way to the front of the group, his floppy hair falling in his eyes. "But you still promise to teach me how to do it? You promised, that means you're gonna do it."

"I'm definitely still gonna teach you, Mike", the teen responded gently, ruffling the boys dark hair, "But be warned, being a dungeon master is not for the faint of heart."

"I can handle it", Mike insisted, puffing out his chest. The whole scene made Jonathan smirk down at the boys.

"I have no doubt", the teen provided before turning back to his brother, "Okay, Will, it's time to go."

Will didn't argue and turned to say goodbye to his friends before climbing inside their old car.

The two brothers spent the next ten minutes in the car discussing their days. From Jonathan's newest photography project to Will's art class, they managed to cover every bit of their day. Then, in the middle of Jonathan trying to tell Will what they had for dinner, the younger brother noticed something along the side of the road.

"Hey, Jonathan", piped Will, poking his head closer to the windshield, "Who is that?"

"Who is who?" he responded, not taking his eyes off the road as he drove back towards their house after school.

Will pointed slightly left of their lane, tapping his finger on the windshield.

"Them."

Jonathan craned his neck slightly, looking beyond the slight hill they were driving up. A few dozen feet in front of them was someone on a bike, probably freezing their ass off. They were wrapped tightly in what looked to be three layers of scarves and jackets in some vain attempt to keep warm against the wind. It only made them look like a human marshmallow. There was a backpack strapped to the back of the bike, meaning the person was probably a student.

"I don't know who that is, buddy", Jonathan said curiously, turning his attention back to the road.

"Well, should we ask them if they need a ride?" inquired Will.

Jonathan glanced over at his brother. It wasn't that he didn't want to help whoever was dumb enough or unlucky enough to be stuck on a bike in the middle of February, but he didn't want to invite some stranger in his car while Will was there. They could be some sort of pervert or psycho. "Buddy, we have to get home and we promised Mom-"

"Please, Jonathan", he pleaded, pulling out his best puppy dog eyes, "They've gotta be freezing. And mom isn't expecting us for another half an hour."

Jonathan sighed, knowing his brother was right. Goddamnit.

"Okay, fine", Jonathan sighed, running a hand through his hair, "But if they're some sort of Michael Myers, I blame you."

Will giggled, leaning back to pull his backpack out of the back seat to make room for the stranger.

Jonathan managed to pull up to the biker and slowed down to keep pace with them. He tried to see their face, but it was wrapped tightly in a scarf with a thick woolen hat covering their head all the way down past their eyebrows, making it impossible to tell what they looked like. Will rolled down his window so Jonathan could call out to whoever they had just accosted.

"Hey!" called out Jonathan, startling the biker. They swerved slightly, quickly correcting themselves before they hit a patch of ice. They

looked over through the window, brown eyes wide and confused.

"Hello?", they responded, their voice muffled by the thick scarf around their face. Their voice was higher pitched, so they must be a girl.

Jonathan wasn't quite sure what to say. He hadn't thought this far ahead.

"Um", he stuttered, not used to talking to marshmallow-esque strangers through car windows, "I noticed you were- well, it looks like you don't have a ride. And it's too cold to bike and-"

"As you can tell, I'm biking just fine", came a muffled jab, the pair of brown eyes narrowing suspiciously.

"I was just gonna offer you a ride", responded Jonathan awkwardly, "If you wanted it."

The girl started to rub at her nose nervously, eyes flicking around as if looking for a way out of this conversation. "Sorry", she called out in her muffled voice, "I appreciate the offer. Really. But taking rides from boys you don't know is how kids end up on the backs of milk cartons, so I think I'll play this one safe."

"Please", pleaded Will through the window, shooting the poor girl the same puppy dog look he had used on Jonathan less than two minutes ago, "We just wanna make sure you don't get sick or something."

The girls bike slowed slightly, her eyebrows scrunching together. She looked over at Will through the window before sighing heavily.

"Okay", she relented, bringing her bike to a stop, "Fine. A ride would actually be pretty nice."

Will smiled, thumping the heel of his hand against the door to signal Jonathan to stop. Jonathan gave a sigh just as heavy as the girl on the bike, braking and pulling over.

Bracing himself for the cold, Jonathan stepped out of the car to help marshmallow girl with her bike. He popped the trunk open before shuffling his way over to the struggling girl.

"We can keep that in the trunk", he said, awkwardly pointing towards the bike.

The girl poked her head up, looking utterly surprised that he was out of the car. She looked like she might protest before realizing that putting her bike in the trunk was the only logical option.

"Y-you know you don't have to do this", she stuttered, the cold seeming to get to her now that she had stopped moving, "I'm totally fine biking the rest of the way, it's not that far."

She shakily lifted her gloved hand to tug down the scarf wrapping itself around her mouth. With the scarf down, Jonathan could see most of the girls face, from her round cheeks and blue tinted lips to her dark, thick brows and bright red nose. A few strands of what appeared to be thick brown hair poked out of her cap and stuck to her cheeks. She was short, maybe a few inches shorter than himself. She looked familiar, like someone Jonathan might have seen in his peripheral vision once or twice.

"It's nothing", he responded, grabbing hold of her bike to put it in the trunk, "I, uh, I know you from somewhere. Are you in my class?"

The girl glanced over at him, helping him shove the bike in the trunk. "Um, yeah", she drawled, "We're in a lot of the same classes."

The boy felt his chest constrict with guilt. Why didn't he know who she was? "Shit, I'm-uh- I'm so sorry. I'm usually at the back and-"

"Oh, no no!", she interrupted suddenly, looking nervous, "I'm not mad or anything. Not a lot of people notice me. It's totally cool. I'm usually at the front in the corner for classes, so not a lot of people see me. I- shit, I made things awkward didn't I?"

Jonathan grimaced slightly. "No, no. No it's not awkward. I mean- I am, but that's just, um, my natural state, I guess. What's, uh, what's your name?"

"I'm Sammy. Well, Samantha Thompson, but people call me Sammy."

She said her name nervously, like it was something shameful, but Jonathan couldn't understand why.

"Well, I'm Jonathan", he responded quietly, shutting the trunk door, "Byers."

The two stood there awkwardly in the cold before Jonathan gestured weakly towards the car door. Sammy quickly got the idea and scuttled into the back seat. Jonathan slid back into the driver's seat and starting the car. He heard Sammy removing all the layers she had cocooned around her.

Will turned his head curiously over towards the girl in the back. "I'm Will", he said politely.

Sammy looked up after removing her flannel shirt, revealing a pink and white uniform shirt. She smiled at the young boy before responding kindly, "I'm Sammy."

She removed her cap, splaying her brown curls all over the place. Entire chunks of thick brown hair stuck up, poking out of the braids on either side of her head, rendering them useless at holding her hair back.

"So, um", muttered Jonathan, tapping lightly on the wheel, "Where are you going?"

"Oh", she piped, shuffling around awkwardly in the back, "Sorry, I forgot to mention it. Benny's Burgers. That's where I work."

Will whipped around, crawling up just above the seat to shoot Sammy a wide eyed smile. "I love that place!", he beamed, bouncing in his seat before turning to Jonathan, "If we're headed that way anyway, can we get some fries?"

Jonathan glanced back to see that Sammy was smiling sweetly at his brother before turning back to Will. "Sorry, bud", he responded softly, "I don't have any cash on me."

"But Jonathan-"

"Hey", he interrupted gently, smiling apologetically at his little brother, "Next time, okay bud? Plus, mom left us mac n' cheese in the fridge."

Will pouted before sliding back down in his seat. "We're here, anyway", he muttered moodily, making Jonathan slump dejectedly.

Jonathan pulled into the parking lot without a word and stepped back out into the cold. He made his way to the trunk to remove the bike. Sammy shuffled out of the backseat, clutching the piles of clothes in her arms. Her nose was still bright red and her lips still weren't a normal color, but they were a light purple instead of blue, so that was an improvement.

"Here you go", he said softly, handing Sammy the bike, "You know, I could probably pick you up and take you home if you-"

"No, that's okay", she interrupted nervously, looking uncomfortable, "I'm, uh, gonna be here late. Long shift. Covering for someone. I don't want to bother you."

Jonathan could tell she was lying by the way she was shifting around, not looking at him. She must not want to be seen in a car with the school's resident pretentious creep. He couldn't help but resent it slightly. It's not like he knew the girl, but he didn't know what he had expected.

"Yeah, cool", he responded, aggravated, before shutting the trunk door a little harder than before.

"Thank you", Sammy added quickly, "Really. I really appreciate it."

"Don't mention it", Jonathan bit back, not meaning to sound so annoyed.

Sammy recoiled slightly, her body shivering against the cold in just her uniform. Her hair had started to frizz slightly in the dry air, falling against her forehead. Her eyebrows drew together guiltily. She shuffled on the spot for a few seconds before waving awkwardly and heading towards the kitchen entrance, bike in tow.

Jonathan sighed, sliding back into the driver's seat.

"Think she'll be okay to get home?" asked Will, looking concerned for the girl.

Jonathan smiled tiredly over at his brother. "I'm sure she'll be fine. She must not live far if she bikes."

The two brothers nodded at each other before Jonathan turned the key to start the car and began to back out.

"Wait!", someone cried out as they were pulling out of the parking spot. Jonathan quickly slammed on the brakes, throwing himself and Will against the backs of their seats. Startled, he whipped his head around and saw Sammy sprinting towards their car. She was only wearing her uniform, meaning she was sprinting in 28 degree weather in only jeans and a short sleeved shirt.

"Did- did you forget something?", he stuttered, still startled from the sudden stop.

Sammy came to a quick stop by the window of the car with something clutched against her right hip. She was panting slightly, eyes flicking towards the kitchen door she had just exited. She thrust her hand in through the window, revealing a large box of fries before dropping it in Will's lap.

"For my knight in shining armour", she panted, smile spreading across her soft face, "Just don't tell my boss."

Jonathan's mouth opened and closed, gaping like a fish. He didn't know what to say. Will apparently didn't have that problem.

"Thank you thank you thank you", he cheered rapidfire, already beginning to stuff the food in his mouth.

Jonathan looked up through the window at Sammy, who was still nervously glancing back at the kitchen door. "Th-thank you", he muttered awkwardly, giving her what he hoped looked like a smile but probably looked more like a grimace. But she didn't seem to mind. She smiled right back, her round cheeks dimpling before she turned tail and ran back to the door before anyone would notice she was gone.

3. Pens & Pizza

The next day, Sammy nearly slept through her class discussion on Lord of The Flies. It wasn't that she didn't enjoy the book. On the contrary, it had quickly become one of her favorites. But she had spent the previous evening working two shifts at two different diners, and the rest of the night had been spent on her homework, meaning she hadn't gotten to bed until well past midnight. And, as usual, she had to wake up by five to make her dad breakfast and make it to school on time.

She felt like a corpse, dragging herself from class to class, barely taking in any information. Her unwashed hair stuck up out of it's half hearted ponytail and her shirt smelled like burnt coffee since she had forgotten to turn the stove off that morning as she cooked. She was just about ready to slam her head against the desk to release even an ounce of adrenaline to keep herself awake, but that would only draw unwanted attention.

Just as people started taking their seats for biology, Sammy saw a certain Jonathan Byers enter the classroom.

Speaking of unwanted attention.

It's not like she hadn't heard of Jonathan Byers before. Word around the school was that he was some sort of perverted creep who hid in the girls bathroom, but Sammy had never really payed attention. He'd never bothered her or anyone she knew, so she had concluded that the rumors were just bullshit the Unholy Trinity- Steve, Tommy H. and Carol- spewed because they had nothing better to do.

Sammy couldn't help the pinch of guilt in her chest, though, when she saw him walk into class. She still felt ashamed at having to take a ride from him and his brother. And she felt even worse when she had turned him down when he had offered her a ride home after work. But it wasn't really her fault, she rationalized. She didn't want him to know she worked two jobs. It wasn't any of his business. Besides, he would probably react the same way most people did.

Your daddy too drunk to get a job himself?

Why do you need two jobs if you live in a shit hole?

Do they really hire white trash like you to serve people? Like, in public?

No, Sammy didn't want to have to deal with that, so she told him she would be working too late for him to pick her up. He had looked hurt at her rebuff, which made her chest constrict with guilt.

Sammy examined Jonathan as he walked into class. He looked even more tired than she did, if that was possible. With his deep set eyes and dark blonde hair falling in his face, he managed to naturally look like a teen zombie. Maybe it was the Unholy Trinity who managed to make him look so tired and miserable. Everyone knew how much they liked to torment him.

He seemed to be looking for her too. His eyes met hers at her corner desk, looking slightly startled. He must have felt guilty about not knowing who she was. Sammy forced a smile onto her face and waved awkwardly to him. He mimicked her movement before tucking his head down and going to his desk in the back.

Sammy might have said hi if Mr. Hudson hadn't just entered the class, looking just as miserable as the students in the class.

Poor guy, thought Sammy sympathetically. Most of the students slept through his class and he seemed too old and grumpy to care. Not that it made up for his shit personality.

The brunette pulled out her notebook and pen, ripping the cap off with her teeth and not bothering to spit it onto the desk. She began scribbling notes furiously in her worn out notebook as Hudson explained the internal organ system like it was a personal inconvenience to him. She sketched out a rough diagram of the organs as they appeared on the chalkboard, making sure to note what they were and what they did. She strained to hear Mr. Hudson's sullen droning over Carol popping her gum two seats behind Sammy.

Liver functions. *Pop.*

Digestive process. *Pop.*

Gallbladder. *Pop.*

Sammy felt her jaw tighten and her fingers clench around her pen, preparing to chuck it at Carol's hairspray laden head when the bell rang. She snapped her head up at the shrill sound, pulling the chewed up pen cap from between her teeth before beginning to carefully slide her notebook into her backpack as students carelessly shuffled out around her. She reached over to grab her pencil bag too, but Tommy H. shoved it off the desk on his way out of the class, scattering her pens and pencils on the dirty linoleum floor.

"Oops", he chuckled, sticking his hand in Carol's back pocket while they sauntered out of class.

Asshole.

Dropping to her knees with a frown, Sammy sighed and reached around her to pick up the various writing utensils around her. Several had rolled down the aisle, making her look a little insane as she scrambled around to get each one.

"Umm, I think- uh, these are yours."

The brunette whipped her head around towards the soft voice behind her to see Jonathan kneeling a few feet away, holding out a handful of red and blue pens nervously towards her. His face was pinched together like he wasn't enjoying having to speak out loud.

"Oh, thank you", Sammy sighed gratefully, snatching the pens from Jonathan's outstretched hand and shoving them into her backpack, no longer bothering with the pencil bag. They clacked against her old walkman as she hoisted her backpack over her shoulder.

"Ever the knight in shining armour", she joked awkwardly, shuffling back towards the door. She even went as far as shooting him finger guns.

Jonathan didn't respond, instead choosing to nod and pinch his face even tighter, making Sammy's stomach twist in embarrassment.

What did you do that for, you idiot?, she thought irritably to herself.

"Umm", she muttered, poking her finger towards the door, "Class. Gotta, y'know, get to it."

The tall boy nodded, hunching his shoulders over and avoiding eye contact. With a half-hearted laugh, Sammy spun on her heel and stumbled her way out of the class with a strong urge to either smack her head against one of the lockers or lock herself in the bathroom for an hour.

One thing was for sure. Sammy never wanted to humiliate herself in front of Jonathan Byers again.

"What about eggs?" Joyce asked, her head stuck all the way in the back of the fridge.

"Yeah, Mom", Jonathan responded from the living room, laying his head on the back of the couch, "That would be great."

There was a rattle from inside the fridge and a smattering of curse words from his mom before she popped her head out of the appliance and slammed it closed. Jonathan peered over curiously before Will poked him in the shoulder, catching his attention.

"The eggs were rotten", he said simply, plopping down on the couch beside his brother with his Millenium Falcon model cradled in his hands.

"Well, why didn't you say anything?" Jonathan asked, glaring over tiredly at his brother.

Will just shrugged, his mop of brown hair falling into his eyes as the two brothers heard their mother slam several pantry doors shut.

"How about we go out to dinner tonight?", Joyce pronounced, finally giving up on rummaging through the pantry, "I mean, I know I'm sick of three day old macaroni."

"Yeah", Will chuckled, turning to Jonathan with a smile.

Jonathan smiled back at his little brother before turning towards his mother, who now had strings of spider webs and grease caught in her hair. "Where were you thinking, mom?"

Joyce looked up, pursing her lips. She stayed like that for a second

before smiling and grinning merrily at her sons. "How about Jenny's Pizza?"

"Yes!", cried Will, which overlapped with Jonathan's subtle "Yeah."

Joyce grinned and snatched her purse off of the kitchen table before ushering the boys into the car. The drive was short and Will spent the whole time bouncing excitedly in the back seat. Jonathan spent the time looking out at the side of the road. He wished he'd brought his moms camera with him. The lighting in the trees was perfect right now.

They soon arrived at the restaurant and parked. As they walked in, Jonathan noticed that there were several bikes in the bike rack. Who would want to bike all the way here in the cold? The family made their way inside, following Will, who was excitedly running towards a corner booth.

Jonathan slid in beside his brother, their mom sitting across from them. Will immediately grabbed the little pack of crayons and his kids menu and began to scribble something in bright green.

"So", Joyce said jovially, raising the menu to her face, "How about a large plain cheese, maybe some pop?"

Jonathan smiled, sliding his menu to the center of the table without even looking at it. "That sounds great, mom."

Before Joyce could respond, a waitress came up to their table. Her face was ducked into her notepad, which she was scribbling furiously in. "Hello, welcome to Jenny's Pizzeria, I'm-"

"Sammy!" cheered Will, poking his head around Jonathan.

The teenage boy looked up to see that their waitress was indeed the girl they had given a ride to several days ago. Her hair was pulled up this time, a full frizz of curls sticking up in every direction. She was wearing the same pair of ripped up jeans as she had been earlier, but the shirt had changed to a black and red button up with *Jenny's* stitched into the lapel. Her cheeks were bright pink and her pen was frozen over the notepad. She looked like a deer caught in headlights.

"Oh, do you two know each other?", Joyce asked excitedly, turning to her teenage son. Jonathan curled back under her overly excited gaze. She must think Jonathan had finally made a friend.

"Um, well-"

"Yeah!", piped Sammy nervously, fiddling with her notepad, "We go to school together. Same classes."

Joyce smiled happily. "Well, that's just wonderful! Jonathan, shame on you. You didn't tell me a friend of yours worked here."

"Yeah, I thought you worked at Benny's Burgers", interjected Will, still scribbling on his children's menu with crayons.

Sammy shuffled on the spot and rubbed at her nose, a gesture Jonathan was starting to realize was a nervous habit. "I do", she responded, giving the boy a slightly strained smile, "But I work here too. Gotta save up some extra money."

"Ugh, you working kids must cluster together", joked Joyce, smiling up at the girl, "You know Jonathan has a job too. Works whenever he can. Always saving up. I keep trying to convince him to buy something for himself with the money, but no. Always saving for college. Always buying us groceries. He's sweet like that."

Jonathan cringed, wanting nothing more than to tell his mom to stop. Or just sink into the floor where no one, especially the frizzy haired girl beside him, could see him. His mom obviously couldn't tell just how awkward this was getting for the two teens.

"That's, uh, great!", Sammy struggled, awkwardly moving her arms in a half thumbs up gesture, "It, uh, builds character and stuff. Having a job, I mean. Um, can I take your order?"

"Oh, yes!", Joyce cried, mercifully remembering why they were there, "We'll have one large cheese pizza and three Cokes."

Sammy removed a sheet of paper off of her notepad and stuffed it in her apron pocket before jotting down the order onto the pad. "Coming right up."

She quickly turned on her heel and made her way to the kitchen, her shoulders slumped up like she was trying to hide. She couldn't seem to move fast enough.

As soon as she was gone, Joyce rounded on her son. "You didn't tell me you had a friend", she stage whispered excitedly, "A friend who's a *girl!*"

"Mom", hissed Jonathan, whipping his head around to make sure Sammy wasn't within earshot, "It's not like that. We're in the same class. We've talked once. That's it."

Joyce leaned back, smirking knowingly.

"Well, I suggest you talk a little more", she said, jabbing her finger against the table with finality, "That's how friendships start. And she seems like a very nice girl. And she's very pretty."

"Mom, you don't even know her", groaned the teen, feeling heat rush up to his cheeks. He didn't like talking about his lack of friends, and he definitely didn't like getting social advice from his mother.

"But she is nice", piped Will, who had returned to sketching on his paper menu, "She gave us that box of fries for free, remember?"

Jonathan groaned and thumped his head against the table as his mother rounded on him, her mouth wide in a smile. "That's where you got those fries?"

Will began to laugh at his brother hitting his head against the table in frustration. Joyce wiped away a fake tear, looking playfully starry-eyed. "I'm planning the wedding already", she mused merrily, doing a little dance in her seat.

Jonathan almost groaned again but it felt too repetitive. Besides, it wouldn't stop his mother's daydreams. He lifted his head to see his mother chuckling, her eyes shining.

"What did you say her name was, again?", she asked kindly.

"Samantha", responded Jonathan quietly, rolling his eyes, "Samantha Thompson. But she prefers Sammy."

"Samantha Thompson?", Joyce inquired, her brows furrowed. She looked over at the brunette, who was carrying a tray of Cokes to another table. "She must be Greg Thompson's kid."

"You know her dad?", asked Will curiously, setting his crayons down and leaning forward.

Joyce snapped her eyes away from the girl and quickly slapped on a smile. "Yeah, he comes to the store almost every day. Very nice man. Always polite."

Jonathan eyed his mom suspiciously. He opened his mouth to press for further information, but was interrupted by the girl in question bringing them their Cokes.

"Here you go", she quipped sweetly, placing each cup in front of them, "Pizza's in the oven. It should be done in about five minutes."

"Oh, thank you", gushed Joyce kindly, smiling up at the teen.

"Is there anything else I can do for you?", Sammy asked, looking at each of the Byers in turn.

Jonathan noticed a piece of paper poking out of her apron, and quickly recognized it.

"Is that the, uh, biology homework?", he inquired suddenly, pointing at the slip of paper. Sammy glanced down, also taking notice of the paper.

"Oh", she chuckled awkwardly, "Yeah. You know, gotta finish it sometime."

"I- uh, I couldn't understand any of it", Jonathan sputtered, regretting opening his mouth, "But, well, science isn't exactly… my, uh…"

"It's not that difficult", Sammy picked up helpfully, giving him a small smile, "It's just diagramming organs and stuff. Once you get it memorized it's not that bad. Besides, Mr. Hudson isn't that great of a teacher, so it's probably not just you."

"That's- uh, great!", Jonathan supplied, his face pinching with

embarrassment. Why the hell did he open his mouth? "Yeah, I'll do that tonight. Hopefully, um, get some stuff right."

"Yeah", the girl said, a deep chuckle in her voice, "And if you need help, I- uh, tutor and stuff. Math, science, that sorta... stuff."

"Cool", Jonathan responded, face tight as he nodded awkwardly up at the girl. She got the hint that he didn't have anything more to say and shot both Joyce and Will a big, fake smile.

"Well, it was nice to meet you all", she exclaimed, her fingers twitching in a way that Jonathan guessed was her trying not to rub at her nose, "I better get back to the kitchen. If you need anything, just- uh…"

Finally, like she simply gave up, she let her fingers rub at the bridge of her upturned nose, spun around and shuffled back towards the kitchen.

"Well, that was awkward", Will drawled, cringing as he turned back to his drawing, "You really have no idea how to talk to girls."

"Drink your soda", Jonathan grumbled, ducking his head in embarrassment.

Luckily for him, neither his mother or his brother brought up the awkward encounter again. The pizza made its way over to their table after about ten minutes and they stuffed their faces. Will had managed to pack away four whole slices and Jonathan had only managed one and a half.

As his mom was finishing up her last piece, Jonathan happened to glance over towards the kitchen and saw Sammy holding her head in her hands. She had the restaurants phone pressed up against her ear as she seemed to barter with whoever was on the other line to no avail. She started to nod, her face twisted up in a distressed frown before hanging up and heading towards the back, her shoulders slumped.

He didn't bring it up as dinner went on. Soon, his family was done. With the rest of the pizza packed away in their little to-go containers,

the Byers exited the restaurant and made their way to the car. As they shuffled through the cold air, Will and their mom were happily discussing his new drawing which he kept tucked under his arm. Jonathan's attention, however, was caught by a rattling a little ways behind him.

Jonathan peered over and saw Sammy struggling with her bike chain. Her shift must have just ended. The girl was back in her multiple layers of winter clothes, scarf and all. She looked utterly miserable. She finally managed to unlock it. It must have been frozen. She must have felt Jonathan peering over at her and looked up, locking eyes with the boy.

She shuffled her feet and waved at him awkwardly, much like she had a few days ago when he had dropped her off at Benny's. He was about to tell his mother that he would be right back, but Sammy hopped on her bike and quickly peddled into the night, not glancing back.

Sammy snapped her bike chain shut with a sigh, stuffing her hands into her pockets as she trudged into the police station for what must have been the thousandth time.

The familiar burst of stale air hit her in the face as she shuffled through the ugly florescent halls, not even bothering to take off her jacket. The usual suspects milled around, the same cops and degenerates that graced these halls at least three times a week. Sammy even waved at Terra, the local prostitute, and asked her how community college was going.

"Real good, sugar", Terra replied, her lipstick smeared smile soft and gentle.

Sammy smiled back at her and kept on going down the familiar hallway towards the chief's office. Taking a deep breath and trying to keep her composure, she gently knocked on the door and waited.

"Come in", Hopper's gruff voice grumbled from behind the door.

She pushed the door open and stepped through the doorway, taking

in the familiar messy office and smell of cigarettes. Papers were falling off of the desk not due to amount, just due to pure laziness and lack of organization. Chief Hopper looked up at her from behind his desk, pieces of powdered doughnut stuck to his stubble.

"How's it going, Chief?", Sammy asked politely, standing stiffly in the doorway.

"Well, just closed a case on an animal attack", Hopper responded, nodding his head and wiping the powder from his chin, "Turns out the owl just thought Eleanor Galespi's head was a nest."

Sammy flashed him a small smile, chuckling a little under her breath. "Can't blame the little guy", she joked, playfully glaring over at Hopper, "Half the time I can't tell the difference between her hair and a jumble of branches either."

"It is something to behold", Hopper drawled, smirking back at her in a familiar fashion.

"Hey", the girl defended, raising her hands slightly, "She does the best she can. I actually kinda like that braided look she's trying these days. The flowers were a nice touch, too."

Hopper managed to chuckle along, shoving another doughnut into his mouth before pushing whatever paperwork he had been working on to the side. Sammy felt the air shift as the laughter died out. She glanced down at her feet before asking what she came here to ask.

"So", she huffed out, figuring it would be easier to just get it over with, "Where is he?"

Hopper's smile dropped almost immediately and he glanced down at his desk, uncomfortable. "Well kid, it's- uh, you see-"

"We've been through this a thousand times, Chief", Sammy cut in, tugging at the ends of her flannel sleeves while flashing his a reassuring smile, "I just need to know if he's in the drunk tank or an actual cell this time. Florence didn't mention it, and, well..."

The police chief sighed, rubbing at his scruff before standing up from his desk. "Cell."

Sammy felt her chest drop. A cell meant bail, which meant more bills they couldn't pay on time. She tried quickly doing the math in her head, factoring in some expenses she could sidestep or cut out completely, but it all lead to the same conclusion: she was screwed.

"Look, kid", Hopper tried to reassure her, "Your dad's fine. We can skip the bail, it's not gonna be an issue."

"No", Sammy sputtered, feeling her neck flush in embarrassment, "It's- uh, we can handle it, I swear. I'll just- it's just some extra tip money or-"

"Seriously", Hopper insisted, cutting her off with a serious grimace, "Take it. You're gonna need it."

The teenage girl furrowed her brows, sensing something worse was coming. "What do you mean, I'm gonna need it?"

The chief looked like a fish with his mouth gaping open and shut. He started nervously scratching at his neck, sputtering what must have been complete nonsense. Sammy wasn't amused in the slightest as the older man tried to find the words he was looking for.

"Hopper", she cut in seriously, looking him square in the eyes, "I can handle it. What did my dad do?"

The older man looked at her sympathetically for a few more seconds before reaching over to his desk and pulling out a piece of paper. He handed it over to Sammy, who grabbed at it hesitantly. "Your dad did some property damage over at the bar. Broke some glasses, snapped the legs off a few chairs, shit like that."

Sammy felt her stomach drop. Property damage meant fines, interest. It meant a lot more money that she didn't have. Time she didn't have for even more shifts.

"Samantha", Hopper sighed, looking like he was trying to reassure her while awkwardly deciding whether to pat her on the shoulder, "If I could change it, I would. But Ryan isn't budging on this one. Said your dad owed him a hell of a lot more after- well, I'll help out where I can and-"

"No", Sammy responded, snapping her gaze back up to the chief with a big smile plastered on her face, "It's- it'll be okay. I promise, we'll manage. I'll take care of it. Could you, um- could you drive him home? I can't get him back on my bike."

Hopper opened his mouth like he was going to say something, but just shut it and nodded. Rubbing at the back of his neck, the police chief made his way back to his desk to pull out the paperwork for Sammy to fill out so her dad could be released.

She ran the math a dozen times in her head, but Sammy knew that there was only one conclusion: she needed more money. There was no way in hell she was going to pull anything out of her college savings account, and their account for bills and groceries was nearly empty. Steeling herself for what she would have to do, Sammy decided that she needed another job. And fast.

4. Gas Station Blues

Jonathan felt like his eyes might fall out of his head.

It was midnight, and he'd been standing behind the gas station register for eight hours. He'd decided to cover Sean's shift and had barely seen a customer the entire time. Boredom ate away at his brain as the buzz of the fluorescents rang through his ears. He'd finished all his homework, organized the back room, scrubbed the counters clean. He'd done everything he could think of to alleviate the boredom and now he was left with absolutely nothing to do but wait for another two hours for his shift to end.

The shaggy haired boy stared wistfully out the window into the mid March air, watching the ice as it was trapped in a sort of half frozen, half melting state. Not for the first time that night did he wish he had his mother's camera with him.

He could hear his boss, Rufus, talking to someone down an aisle in the back of the store. Probably some girl he was trying to pick up. His greasy drawl made the teen want to plug his ears or run out of the convenience store head first. Whichever came first.

Jonathan ran his hands over his face, trying in vain to stay awake. Maybe smacking himself in the head would help?

"...So you'll just be restocking the shelves for the next day and shit like that", Jonathan heard Rufus drone on to someone. Why the hell was he talking about the shelves?

"...not a hard job, just don't rob us and we're good." Rufus continued, his voice dripping with sarcasm while making his way towards the cash register, "Not to mention the absolutely dazzling conversations you'll have with your coworker."

Coworker?

"Wait", Jonathan croaked, rubbing the sleep from his eyes, "Coworker?"

Rufus turned around, his head poking out from behind one of the shelves. His little rodent eyes squinted over at Jonathan, as if he was looking straight through him.

"Did I forget to tell you?", Rufus inquired passively, resting his elbow on the shelf beside him, "Shit. Sorry, bro."

Rufus shrugged before turning back towards the aisle, calling out to whoever was down there. They were obscured by a large stack of soda boxes and energy drinks. "This will be your fellow graveyard shift buddy, Jonathan."

Jonathan heard someone squeak in surprise down the aisle and something fall to the floor. The figure dropped down, apparently scrambling to pick up whatever it was they had dropped. Jonathan peered over, seeing a flash of brown frizz as the figure made their way around the corner. When he saw who it was, he wanted to slam his head against the cash register.

Sammy fucking Thompson.

Why did he keep running into this girl? Why did he have to keep humiliating himself in front of a girl who clearly wanted nothing to do with him?

Sammy scampered through the aisle, shoulders hunched together and head ducked down. Once again, she was rubbing at her nose to the point that Jonathan wondered if the skin was going to rub off. Rufus apparently didn't pick up on the awkward tension.

"So", he drawled, scratching at his ass without shame, "You two will be working until about two, then you're free to go. Sarah, you'll-"

"Uh, it's Sammy, actually", she provided quietly, dropping her fingers from the bridge of her nose and holding her arms stiffly at her side.

"Whatever", Rufus responded passively, waving her off, "You'll be restocking the shelves, making sure no one robs the place. Blah blah blah."

Jonathan watched as Rufus swayed slightly on his feet, smelling the stench of stale beer and nicotine rolling off of him. He snuck glances

at Sammy, who still had her head ducked and hair covering her face.

"Well, one extra rule now", Rufus continued, gathering his bearings, "No fucking on the job."

Jonathan choked on his spit. His face burned as he stared down at the cash register, avoiding looking at either one of the people in front of him.

"What?", Sammy squeaked, her ears burning pink.

"Yeah, you know", the manager chuckled, winking at Jonathan grossly, "Boy and girl, late nights, that sorta shit. But it's kind of a rule that you can't go into the back room and-"

"Why would you think we would- that we'd-", Sammy sputtered, sticking her nose in the air angrily, "I wouldn't- just because he's a boy and I'm a girl doesn't mean we're gonna-"

"Look", Rufus cut in, sending a stale breath towards Sammy, who scrunched her nose at the foul stench, "I don't give a fuck what you to do. Just no robbing and no fucking. Got it?"

The manager didn't wait for an answer before heading down the aisle towards the parking lot. Sammy still stood there, her lips opening and closing as if she was still trying to figure out what to say to that. Jonathan felt his face still burning and rubbed at his cheeks to try and make the redness go down.

"He- uh, he does that a lot", Jonathan stuttered, trying to break the silence, "He goes to his car to get high during the shift."

She shot an embarrassed glare over towards the parking lot. "Classy", she muttered, fiddling with the backpack slung over her shoulder.

The two teens stood like that for what felt like an eternity. The buzz of the fluorescents was the only sound that cut through. Sammy stood there, shuffling her feet and clutching the strap of her backpack so tight her knuckled had turned white. Jonathan stood stiffly behind the register, unsure of what to say.

Before he could try to open his mouth, Sammy pointed towards the

back room. "That's where we keep our stuff, right?"

Jonathan scratched at his ear, somehow struggling to answer the frizzy haired girl. "Yeah- uh, you can stash your stuff back there. You'll be- uh, you're stocking the shelves now, right?"

"Yeah", she responded, quickly ruffling through her bag and pulling out an old Walkman and headphones, "I'd better store this, you know, and get to work. First day, can't screw up."

"Oh- oh, yeah" Jonathan stuttered, retreating back slightly, "Just, if you need anything- questions or whatever- just ask. No one ever really comes in this late, so…"

"Well, at least it'll be quiet", she chuckled uncomfortably, turning towards the break room, "I'll just… yeah. Can't wait to work with you."

She quickly turned away and practically ran towards the break room. Once again, Jonathan had the urge to slam his head against the register. Silently, the boy cursed the universe for sticking him with the same frizzy haired girl who just couldn't seem to leave him alone.

It had been two weeks. Two weeks of awkward attempts at conversation and endless uncomfortable silences. Sammy had no clue what to do about it. Every time she tried to get Jonathan talking, he started to stutter and seemed to forget how to talk. Either that or he gave quick, one word answers and made it clear he was in no mood for conversation.

The silence was driving her crazy. And she was running out of cassettes to fill the quiet.

Currently, the brunette had her headphones stuck firmly over her ears, old Beatles songs crooning into her ears. She was turning over glass jars of tomato paste label side out due to sheer boredom. She's spent the better part of ten minutes intermittently trying to talk to Jonathan, but was quickly learning that it was pointless. The boy in question was scribbling something down in an old notebook.

The night crept on like that, only the Beatles and cans of pureed tomatoes to keeps her company. No one had come in, as per usual. Only the occasional straggler who had to stop for gas passed through.

Then, seemingly out of nowhere, Sammy heard the faint ding of the door from over her music. Curiously, she pulled her headphones down around her neck and looked over the shelves to see the Unholy Trio themselves sauntering through the store, randomly grabbing snacks from the shelves and dropping extras on the ground without care. The brunette felt herself glare over at the redhead in particular, who somehow still seemed to be popping gum.

Jonathan had noticed them, too. But instead of glaring, he seemed to retreat into himself nervously. It was like he was afraid of them. She couldn't help but feel bad for him as the group approached him, arms laden with snacks.

Steve, who seemed to be the leader at the moment, dropped the food he was holding unceremoniously on the counter. He gestured lazily to the pile, smirking over at Jonathan. "You mind ringing these up?"

Jonathan didn't respond, just began putting the prices into the register. Sammy could see his fingers shaking all the way across the aisle. This didn't sit well with her. She irritably tapped her own fingers against the jar of tomato paste still clutched in her fingers.

"Aw, look at him, Tommy", Carol simpered, her high pitched voice cutting through the entire store, "He's so cute when he's all shaky."

Sammy felt her temper flare at the comment. Those assholes had no right to mess with Jonathan or anyone else. She began to take a step forward, a retort ready on her lips. Jonathan, however, noticed her moving and quickly but discreetly shook his head, telling her to stop. His eyes pleaded for her to stay out of it. So, with some difficulty, Sammy clamped her mouth shut and stayed put.

The group of teens hadn't noticed. So Jonathan rang them up as quickly as he could. "Um, you owe twenty three dollars and- uh, seventy seven cents."

Steve hissed comically as if he had been caught off guards, causing

Sammy to roll her eyes. Man, did he think he was witty. "Oh shit, man. We ain't got that kinda money. How about you take this?"

After shoving his hand in his pocket, Steve dropped a few crumpled up ones on the table. Sammy watched as Jonathan stared at the bills, unsure of what to do. Steve didn't take the time to get a response and made a swipe for the snacks.

"Um", Jonathan began to stammer, curling even deeper in on himself, "You can't- you can't do that. I need twenty three dollars and-"

"Hey, how about you shut it, Psycho", Tommy cut him off, sneering down at the smaller boy, "You're lucky we even came to this shithole."

"Hey now, Tommy", Steve responded smoothly, waving his friend off, "No need to be rude. I'm sure Byers was gonna let us off the hook. Right?"

Steve fixed Jonathan with a look that was somehow equal parts charming and intimidating. Sammy watched as Jonathan seemed to cower under the older boy's shadow, too scared and offended to do anything except stutter.

Sammy decided in that instant that enough was enough. Screw those assholes. Thinking quickly, she swiped a mop out of the bucket a few feet away from her and held her tomato jar at her hip like a weapon. She kept her head ducked as she set a collision course towards Steve.

With carefully planned clumsiness, Sammy ran straight into the big haired ringleader and dropped the glass jar right by his feet, spraying thick tomato paste across all three pairs of shoes. It even made its way across their pant legs, staining their overpriced jeans an ugly red color. Carol let out a screech and the two boys let out yelps of surprise and anger.

"Hey, what the hell are you-"

"Oh, shoot", Sammy implored with a fake earnest voice, holding her hand dramatically to her heart, "I'm so sorry. I'm just so clumsy. Here, let me clean that up."

The brunette then proceeded to take the soaking wet mop and swiped it across their shoes, spreaded the paste around them. The water soaked the paste into their shoes and added the murky grey of the mop water to the already unattractive mix. All three jumped back, still yelling out at her to stop.

"Holy shit, what the hell are you doing?" Steve yelped, jumping away from her.

She continued to mop vigorously, keeping up the act. "If you'd just-"

"Do you know how much these shoes cost?" Carol hissed, backing away from the mop like it might burn her, "You fucking piece of trailer trash!"

Quickly, the redhead snatched her boyfriend's hand and started dragging him out of the store, her pointy nose stuck high up in the air. Steve quickly followed suit, sending Sammy a glare that almost looked impressed before exiting.

Sammy gave them an exaggerated wave, sending them a giant smile. "Come again soon!"

As soon as they were out the door, the brunette sighed and leaned against the mop. She let out a chuckle before picking it back up and actually getting to work on cleaning up the mess she had made.

"I could have handled that."

Sammy looked up to see Jonathan, red in the face and ashamed. She felt the awkwardness set back in as she looked over at the boy who was probably appalled by what she had done. She bent down to pick up the large shards of glass and dumped them in a nearby trash can, keeping her gaze away from the boy behind the counter.

"I know", she reassured him in what she hoped was a kind way, sending him a halfway confident smile, "But I could too. And my way worked faster."

"It also damaged more property", Jonathan shot back, though not unkindly.

Sammy smirked slightly, getting the sense that he wasn't as upset as he wanted her to believe. "A simple thank you would suffice."

With that, all the paste was cleaned up and she had managed to pick up all the glass. Swiping her hands on her jeans to dry them, Sammy picked up the mop and walked back over to the canned foods aisle, plopping the mop back in the bucket.

She was just about to snap her headphones back over her ears when she heard Jonathan's grainy voice from across the room.

"Thank you."

A smile spread across Sammy's face as she turned back towards Jonathan. "That wasn't so hard, was it?"

Without another word, she set her headphones on and pressed play, letting John Lennon's voice fill her ears as she went back to work. Though she could have sworn she saw the other boy smiling slightly out of the corner of her eye.

The next night started the same as all the ones before. Silence, Walkman, awkwardness. Jonathan scribbled in his notebook. She rearranged cans. No one came in. Nothing was different.

Sammy couldn't help but feel disappointed deep in her chest. She'd hoped that yesterday could be an opening to at least some polite conversation. Possible discussions about annoying teachers or polite talks about the weather. Anything to fill the quiet. However, Jonathan seemed to be stuck inside his own head, as usual. He continued to count the cash in his register, scrub the counter, do anything at all to avoid her. The brunette didn't say anything, however. She had no idea how to. She had very little experience with any of this, and she had no clue how to make it something closer to a normal relationship.

So, she continued to move cans. Stack boxes. She continued her monotonous job, tired beyond belief and still smelling the stench of frying oil from working at Benny's Burgers only a few hours before. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't get the smell out of her

skin that day.

Jonathan had moved on to his notebook. He seemed distracted, though, as he scribbled away at it, pausing for long periods of time before moving on through the pages. His pencil hovered over the paper in front of him before he dropped it with a sigh.

"Tomorrow's payday", he mumbled, grimacing at the words that had left his mouth.

Pulling her headphones down off of her head, Sammy sent the boy a surprised expression. She hadn't expected him to speak to her. Ever. "Yeah. Looking forward to it."

The two were then stuck in a strange sort of silence. Sammy could see that he had given her an opening, but she had no idea how to take advantage of it. She nervously scratched at her nose as she noticed his fingers drumming across his notebook.

"So, uh…", she stammered, pointing at the book beneath his fingers, "What are you always writing in there? Haven't seen you without it this week."

Jonathan glanced down at the book, his cheeks heating up. He scratched at the back of his neck nervously, almost like he was embarrassed by the book itself. "Oh, it's- uh, it's for my brother. He and his friends play this game and I- uh, I help out."

"What kind of game?", Sammy inquired curiously, pushing on with the topic since it seemed to yield some sort of result, "Anything I might know?"

If it was at all possible, Sammy watched as Jonathan's face turned a deeper shade of pink. It was actually pretty entertaining, watching him change shades every few seconds. It was like a Looney Tunes cartoon come to life.

"It's…", he muttered, tapping nervously on the notebook once again, "It's Dungeons and Dragons. I- I'm the dungeon master."

The boy retreated into himself, almost as if he was expecting her to laugh in his face. This reaction made Sammy frown. Why would he

be embarrassed at all? She supposed she knew. People like them weren't able to do anything without getting it thrown back in their faces.

"I think that's pretty awesome", she stated firmly, trying to catch his gaze, "I wouldn't have the first clue how to put together something like that. Must be pretty complicated."

The look on Jonathan's face made Sammy feel like pumping her fist in the air and giggle at the same time. His brown eyes widened in surprise and his face began to return to normal color almost as quickly as it had changed. "Yeah", he stuttered, almost like he was trying to make sense of what she had just said, "Yeah, it's pretty fun. But I'm teaching his friend Mike how to do it."

"Wish I had the time to learn something like that", the brunette sighed, swiping some hair behind her ear, "Not much time to spare as of late."

"Yeah, what's up with that?", Jonathan inquired, seeming to become more comfortable with the conversation, though still avoiding her gaze, "What's with the three jobs?"

"Sorry", Sammy jested, turning back to the boy with a playful smirk, "You have to be a level three friend to unlock that information."

Jonathan chuckled, an airy sound that seemed to come from the top of his chest. He ruffled the front of his hair almost as an afterthought, sending the blonde strands falling into his eyes.

"So", Sammy continued, moving on to the cans of peaches beside her to keep her hands busy, "What sort of thing do you want? With your paycheck, I mean."

Jonathan glanced over at her again, shrugging as if what he said was common knowledge. "Oh, well, I usually save up for groceries and helping out with the water bill-"

"Well, I know all that", the brunette cut in, turning the cans over so the labels pointed forward, "I mean, like, what *you're* saving up for. What you want. I mean, there's gotta be something."

The teenage boy's eyes went down, staring intently at the counter. "I- well, I'm trying to get this, uh, this camera. It's a Pentax- or, you know, whatever. Doesn't matter, I just- I want one of my own."

Sammy lowered her hands from the shelf and turned towards the boy at the cash register with a small smile. "You're a photographer?"

Jonathan shrugged, still glaring pointedly at the counter and fiddling with his fingers. Sammy, however, wouldn't drop the subject. She wasn't exactly known to be the giving in type.

"Would I have seen your stuff anywhere?", she continued, leaning against the shelf beside her, "School paper or anything?"

Jonathan scoffed, finally looking up at her with a little proud smirk. "The school paper is a joke."

The brunette shrugged, pressing on. "What about a gallery? Anything around town?"

"You really think I'm good enough for a gallery?", Jonathan questioned, leaning over the counter, "You haven't even seen anything I've done."

Smirking, Sammy gently tapped the end of her mashed in nose before responding in an old timey agent's voice. "I've got a nose for talent, sweetheart, and I can smell it all over ya!"

"You can smell me from over there?", the boy chuckled, his face breaking from a smirk to a real smile.

"I was-" she started to stammer indignantly, "You know I was- whatever. Try to be nice and this is what I get."

"Hey, I'm sorry", Jonathan said over a little bout of laughter, smile spreading on his pale face, "I'm joking."

"Yeah, you better be", Sammy sneered playfully, turning back towards her peaches.

"What are you saving up for?", he asked curiously, leaning further into his elbows and becoming comfortable.

Sammy shrugged, her answer simple and uninteresting in her mind. "College."

"Nothing fun for you?", Jonathan asked, seemingly interested in what she had to say.

"Nah", the brunette shrugged, unbothered by the question, "College is the top priority. No time for other stuff."

The silence that followed then wasn't tense. It wasn't uncomfortable or awkward. It was as if the two of them knew that if they wanted to, they could open that line of communication again. So they continued like that, quietly finishing whatever meaningless jobs they had to fulfill for the next hour. Jonathan continued to scribble in his book and Sammy listened to her music. Things were good in the store for what might have been the first time. The night continued until it was almost time to close up.

"Hey, Sammy?"

The girl turned, turning her Walkman off as she faced the pale boy behind the register. His book was closed and he was looking at her with only a little fidget to show his nervousness.

"You're not that bad." he stated plainly before promptly turning his gaze back to the counter and pulling his backpack out from underneath, ready to leave.

Sammy felt a small smile tug at her lips. This wasn't some movie moment where suddenly the sun rose and they were best friends, but it was something. A hand reaching out, saying it was okay to reach back if needed.

"You're not so bad yourself, Byers", she responded simply, stuffing her Walkman into her bag before hoisting it up on her shoulder and turning towards the door, sending a wave at the boy behind the counter.

A/N: Hello! Thank you so much for taking the time to read this. Sammy has been a character that's been bouncing around in my

head for a long time and I've finally decided to put the stuff I've written out there. I mean, why not? I thought I might respond to the comments since they make me so happy and it seems like the polite thing to do.

Masquerade flower: Thank you so much! I'm so glad Jonathan is in character and that Sammy has piqued your interest. Hope I continue to meet your expectations :D

amanidwalker: So happy you think it's great! Hopefully, I'll update fairly regularly. However, I'm working two jobs right now so that might be a little harder than I want.

zaneri0t: OMG that is the sweetest thing you could have said! I'm so glad you enjoy what I'm writing and I hope I continue to entertain you :)

5. The Party

"If you would just let me see it-"

"No!", Jonathan insisted, barely holding back a laugh as Dustin tried in vain to snatch his backpack and look for his D&D notebook, "The campaign is tomorrow. You can wait another day."

The curly haired boy pouted up at him, trying to give his best puppy dog eyes. "But-"

"No cheating", Mike cut in, playfully shoving his friend in the shoulder, "It's literally tomorrow. You Bards are all the same."

"Whatever, Paladin", he shot back, entering the confrontation far too intensely, "You all think you're so cool."

As the argument began to escalate and the two gangly boys started to argue for real, Jonathan tugged gently on his brother's jacket and pulled him towards the car. Will all too happily complied. The two brothers slid into the car and managed to back out of the parking lot without any of Will's friends noticing or even looking up from their fight. The boys exchanged a quick glance before peeling out of the school grounds and onto the street. With a small giggle, Will leaned back onto the seat and set his gaze on his older brother. He was clearly amused.

"How long do you think they'll be going at it?", the younger boy inquired impishly.

Jonathan shrugged, his lips tugging up into a smirk. "Few hours, maybe. At least until Nancy drags Mike back home."

"Oh, man", Will giggled, his face lighting up with the idea of what the teenage girl would do to his friend, "Mike's gonna be in for it."

The laughter remained in the air as Will reached over and fiddled with the cassette player, flipping through until he managed to get The Clash blasting through the car. Jonathan began to nod his head along to the beat, letting the beat flow through the air. His brother,

on the other hand, took a far more involved interest. He was slamming his hands on the dashboard along with the drum beat, hair flying in every direction. The entire image made Jonathan break out into a full smile. He would have reached out for his mom's camera had it not been for the fact that he was driving.

Without giving him warning, Will smacked Jonathan in the arm. His green eyes were wide with joy as he pointed excitedly out the front window.

"Ow! What-"

"Look!", the boy exclaimed, a smile spreading on his face.

Jonathan followed his finger to see his brother pointing towards a figure riding a bike. He nearly rolled his eyes when he spotted it. With her hair flying free and several layers left off, Sammy was far easier to recognize this time around. Not to mention Jonathan was becoming far more accustomed to seeing her at least four times a week. She seemed to be enjoying the warmer weather as of late, considering she looked more human than marshmallow in just a jean jacket and flannel.

"Can we give her a ride again?" Will asked, turning his big green eyes on his brother.

Jonathan sighed, feeling his shoulders slump under Will's gaze. "Will, come on-"

"Please!" he pleaded, bouncing in his seat, "She could get us fries or something."

"We're not picking Sammy up just so you can guilt her into giving you free food", the teen insisted, trying to match his brothers gaze.

"Please!" Will continued to beg, now whining like a dog and pitching his voice high in that way he knew Jonathan would say yes to just to make the noise stop.

The blonde groaned, his head slumping. "Fine."

The younger boy cheered as Jonathan slowed down next to the bike

like he had so many weeks ago. He rolled down the window, which Sammy was looking curiously into. When she saw Will, her face broke into a sweet smile that wrinkled her nose.

"If it isn't my white knight", she exclaimed over the sound of the car engine, "What brings you to this neck of the woods?"

"Rescuing the fair princess", Will replied easily, returning her smile with equal sweetness. Jonathan leaned over and turned down the volume of the radio while the two continued to converse.

The brunette gasped with exaggerated gratitude, playing along. "Well, how could I ever repay you?"

"Maybe with some fries?", the boy provided with a playfully pleading gaze.

Jonathan watched as Sammy broke out into chuckles, a snort sticking in each laugh. She sent him a quick glance, smirking at him as he gave her an apologetic look. She played along easily though, giving the teenage boy a shrug before turning her eyes back onto Will.

"Sorry, Will", she said simply, "I'm not working at Benny's tonight. It's my night off there."

Will groaned loudly and collapsed onto his seat. Jonathan swatted his arm lightly, embarrassed by the rude reaction. "Hey, be polite. It's not her job to give you fries."

"It's cool", the girl cut in gently, sending a reassuring smile to both of the boys, "Give 'em the first fix, they'll always want more."

"You're telling me", Jonathan chuckled, turning his eyes back to the road for a moment before looking back at Sammy, "I can still give you a ride, you know."

Sammy brushed off the offer, waving off the idea with practiced confidence. "No need, Teen Zombie. I've got some stuff I need to do."

Jonathan felt his eyebrows knit together. "Did you just call me Teen Zombie?"

The curly haired girl smiled over at him, a stray curl hanging over her eyes. "Yep. You need a nickname. It'll humanize you."

"Not Teen Zombie", he deadpanned.

Sammy lifted a hand off one of her handlebars in surrender, feigning seriousness. "I'll keep searching, oh great Dungeon Master."

Jonathan was about to quip back when Will cut in once again.

"Can you get me something tomorrow?" he asked, leaning further out the window.

"Not sure", the girl replied, keeping pace with the car on her bike, "I'll see what I can do. I do have a shift at Jenny's tonight. I might be able to snag something when no one's looking."

Jonathan leaned over. "You really don't have to do that."

"Nah", Sammy drawled, keeping her eyes on the road for a moment, "It's no issue. Not sure how I'll get it to you, though.'

"Maybe if you meet Jonathan for lunch tomorrow", Will smirked, shooting his brother a suggestive waggle of his eyebrows, "I know mom would be happy."

"Shut up, Will" Jonathan muttered, glaring at his brother as intensely as he could without Sammy noticing.

Will didn't seem to be fazed by Jonathan's glare, turning back towards the girl out the window with a grin that was practically sadistic. "Our mom think you two would be cute together. She talks about it all the time!"

"Shut up!", Jonathan hissed, feeling his face flush pink and avoiding looking at the girl in question.

However, he heard her laugh. Jonathan felt his gut drop, emabarrasement flooding through him. God, he'd never be able to look at her again thanks to his mom and her stupid jokes.

"That's so cute!", he heard Sammy chuckle, turning his embarrassed

gaze back towards her, "But I'm afraid I'm gonna have to break her heart. I think you broke your brother, though, Will."

Jonathan felt his shoulder hunch as Sammy continued to laugh at him. He kept his body stiff, not wanting to slump over with pure humiliation. She turned her brown eyes onto him, a smirk still playing at her lips. "I'll meet you for lunch tomorrow and drop off the food."

"Uh- thanks", the boy muttered, still fighting the flush that was creeping over his face.

However, he saw Sammy's gaze catch something not too far ahead. She turned back towards the boys, preparing to speed back up on her bike. "Looks like this is where I leave you, boys. 'Till next time."

She waved quickly before peeling away and into a parking lot a few dozen feet in front of them. Will leaned out the window, waving enthusiastically and calling out a farewell. Jonathan couldn't help but let out a breathy chuckle, the image of Sammy's wild hair flying behind her as she stuck her tongue out at her brother making him smile. He kept his eyes on her as she parked her bike and dismounted before speeding back down the road, the sounds of The Clash filling his car once again.

"Hey, Ryan!"

Sammy trod her way through the cigarette soaked pub and made her way to the bar, waving down the owner with her backpack slung over her shoulder. The small smile that had stuck it's way onto her face from her little play conversation with the Byers boys twisted into a serious look as she made her way over. The man, a greasy faced guy with bushy grey hair, slouched at the sound of her voice. They'd done this enough times to know there was going to be very little fun in this conversation. Sammy plopped down on the worn in barstool and leaned towards the smelly man, all business.

"You got the money, kid?" the bartender huffed, wiping down a glass that most certainly wasn't up to health code.

The frizzy haired girl reached into her back pocket and procured a wrinkled envelope, slapping it down onto the bar. She raised her eyes cooly as the bartender snatched it up and ripped it open. She felt her nose itch as he riffled through the money, counting out loud as he did. When he made his way through the stack, Ryan raised his beady little eyes up to hers in a dirty glare.

"Where's the rest?", he demanded, shoving the wad of cash into his pocket.

Sammy shrugged, keeping herself calm. "You know I'm good for it."

"You are", he chuckled with little humor, "Your daddy ain't. Where's my money?"

She let out a small breath, blowing a strand of hair out of her eyes before glaring over at the man in front of her. "Look, I just need a few more days. My paychecks are coming in a few days, I'll have what I owe you."

Ryan scoffed, slamming a glass down onto the table and sending the teenage girl a dirty look. "Look, kid. If you ain't careful, I'm gonna have to take this to court."

"I already gave you two hundred", Sammy retorted as calmly as she could, feeling her chest tighten with nerves, "I've got the money coming with interest. Just hold off a few more days and-"

"A few more days, my ass", the older man spat, tobacco thick on his breath, "Your daddy fucked up my property so bad I had to get the chief involved. You think I want some fuckin' cop hangin' around here?"

"I get that", she insisted, beginning to feel the inside of her chest shake as she realized that Ryan was serious this time, "And I'm sorry. My dad, he's dealing with some stuff."

"He's always dealing with shit", Ryan shot back, his yellowing teeth on full display, "Some fuckin' man he is, sending his girl to fix his fuck ups."

"Hey!" Sammy spat, feeling her face heat up, "I do this because I'm

better at it. And he's- he's grieving. I've got the money coming, just give me a few days-"

"Quit makin' excuses, girlie", the grey man huffed, eyes boring into her with disgust and pity, "We both know you're spittin' shit right now. It's been nearly two months. I've held my tongue. Pay up or get a lawyer."

"We can't afford that, Ryan!", she pleaded, running her fingers through her hair nervously, "I- I don't know where I can get that money today."

"Not my fuckin' problem", he grumbled, "You owe me another two hundred. Come up with somethin'."

Sammy felt her chest shake and face pale. There was only one place she could get the money on such short notice, but she really *really* didn't want to do it. She turned her gaze out the window and looked over at the bank just across the block, sad and imposing as it always was.

She sighed, looking defiantly up at Ryan. "I'll be back in twenty minutes. Make sure no one steals my backpack."

The older man snorted in response, making Sammy hate him even more in that moment. With another withering glare, she slid off the barstool and slumped out of the pub. She made her way across the deserted street and towards the sleek doors of the only bank in town. The crunch of stray gravel under her sneakers didn't help the already upsetting atmosphere. As she pushed the glossy doors open and stepped into the lobby, Sammy felt nauseous. The whole building always made her feel nervous. From the ugly green carpets to the dirty windows, the place always made her want to vomit from nerves. She shuffled awkwardly towards the front desk. The old redheaded receptionist, Carol, looked up at the rustling sounds Sammy's feet made on the old carpet, a small smile tugging at her painted lips.

"Well hello, sugar", she greeted warmly, "How you been? Didn't think payday was until tomorrow."

"Um", Sammy muttered, rubbing at her nose, "I'm- uh, I'm actually here to make a withdrawal."

Carol's carefully stencilled eyebrows pulled together. "Sweetie, you said never touch that money."

"Yeah, I know", she responded as quickly as she could, trying to put on a smile for show, "I- I just needed some help with the bills and-"

"Is this about that mess with your daddy and that old goat Ryan?" the older woman inquired insistently, looking ready to stomp over to the bar across the street in her kitten heels, "Because if either of those fools are making you pull out of your college fund-"

"No", Sammy cut in, "No, nothing like that. It just- uh, the bill was higher this month. Gotta keep the electric company off our asses, you know. I promise, Carol."

The redhead scrutinized her, her blue eyes peering over at her with clear disbelief. However, she leaned forward with a distasteful look on her face. "How much?"

Sammy shuffled her feet. "Two hundred."

Carol huffed, painted face twisting in anger before she composed herself. "Shouldn't put too much of a dent in the fund. Besides, you've got those big brains of yours. Gonna get all the scholarships the school's got."

The young girl smiled gratefully over at the redhead, feeling warm at the compliment. "Thanks, Carol."

The older woman huffed indignantly again before standing from her chair and walking into the back room. Sammy stood awkwardly as she waited for the woman to return. Less than a minute later, Carol stomped over with an envelope clutched tightly in her hand. She held it out to the brunette with her nose stuck in the air.

"Tell Ryan he can stick one of those dirty glasses up his ass", she stated as Sammy extracted the envelope from her iron grip.

Sammy smirked slightly, a laugh playing at her lips. "Will do."

The two women waved a small goodbye before Sammy turned back towards the doors and made the way back towards the dirty bar. Stomping over to the bar, Sammy stood in front of Ryan and slammed the money onto the table before grabbing her backpack and slinging it back over her shoulders.

"You've got your money', she grumbled, glaring at the rodent-like man, "Leave my dad and I alone."

Ryan smirked at her, his yellow teeth and rotten breath blowing in her face. ""Till next time, girlie."

Sammy wanted nothing more than to slap that smirk off of his face, but took a deep breath before spinning on her heel and walking out of the bar. She hoped it was for the last time, but she knew that was a lie. With a barely contained slur of curse words, Sammy mounted her bike and pedalled away.

The cool air bit into her cheeks as she made her way down the back streets. She didn't have a shift until late tonight, and she needed to eat something before. Minutes passed by easily as she biked all the way back to her house. The houses became more run down the further she made it outside of town. Each wooden house all the more depressing before she made it to her own.

As she skidded into her yard, Sammy let her bike fall to the ground as she jumped off of it. She tugged the straps of her backpack as she stomped up the porch stairs and shoved the screen door open. The creaking and slamming of it behind her echoed through the house and startled her dad awake. He flew up off of the couch, still in his boxers and button up flannel. He blinked sloppily up at her, rubbing his eyes and making Sammy feel even smaller than she had before.

"Hey, sweetie", he muttered, a blissful smile spreading on his unshaven face, "How was your day?"

She felt her stomach pinch, forcing a smile onto her face. "It was good, Dad. Talked to Jonathan again today."

"You knock 'em dead on that biology test?" he asked proudly, leaning back down onto the couch.

"Sure did", Sammy sighed, letting the smile slip as he looked away, "Didn't even break a sweat."

"That's my girl", he slurred proudly, laying his arm over his eyes, "Smartest little kid in Hawkins."

Sammy felt her lips tug up into a sad smile. Sucking in a quick breath, she shuffled her way out of the living room and towards her bare room where her uniform was waiting for her.

Jonathan stood at his locker, gently placing his textbooks back inside as students ran at a mad pace towards the cafeteria. Footsteps echoed across the hall as he stood there patiently, carefully keeping his books in order. He'd packed his lunch. He never understood the rush for the rather disgusting cafeteria food.

Just as he pushed his locker door shut, Jonathan spotted a mass of wild curls coming towards him out of the corner of his eyes. He turned his head to see Sammy walking up to him with a small smile on her face. Her bagged lunch was gripped in her hand while the edges of her sleeves fell over her fingers.

"What's up, Blondie?", she lilted, leaning against the locker beside her and looking up at Jonathan. Her brown curls fell over her eyes as she swatted her wild hair out of her face.

"Not much", he replied simply with a shrug, adjusting his backpack on his shoulder, "About to go eat lunch. And no to Blondie."

"What a shocker", Sammy deadpanned, holding up her sad little bagged lunch to his eyeline, "Tell me something I don't know."

Jonathan shrugged, his lips pressed together, "I have a brownie today."

"Well, if you'd told me that...", Sammy chuckled, nodding towards the photo room while her lunch bag crinkled in her iron grip, "Come on, then. I'm freaking starving."

Jonathan felt his eyebrows draw together. "You want to eat lunch with me?"

Sammy turned back to him, looking up at him quizzically. "I mean, if you don't want to-"

"No- not, it's fine", the boy quickly cut in, feeling his cheeks flush again, "I just- I usually sit alone."

The brunette shrugged, unphased. "Me too. Might be a good change of pace for both of us."

Jonathan felt his lips twitch as he followed in the brunette's wake. The two fell into step beside each other as they made their way through the halls towards the photo room. A few remaining students ambled their way towards the stairs, cafeteria trays laden with sickly smelling macaroni. Jonathan felt his stomach turn at the thought of the food. The little gag he heard beside him let him know Sammy felt the same way.

They turned a final corner and finally plopped down in front of the photo room door. Sammy dropped like a ragdoll, practically falling onto her back and groaning as she did. Her lunch was still gripped tight in her fist, parts of the paper tearing as she rolled back up into a sitting position. Jonathan sat beside her, legs sprawled out in front of his as he pulled his backpack off of his shoulder and dug inside to grab his lunch. However, as Sammy unfurled her paper bag, a rancid smell escaped from inside, burning the inside of Jonathan's nostrils.

"Holy crap", he gagged, covering his nose while he turned towards the brunette beside him, "What the hell do you have in there?"

Sammy's eyes widened innocently, looking slightly embarrassed. "It's… it's chicken. I made it last night. It was on sale at the store."

"I can see why", the boy pointed out, still pinching his nose tight, "Did you murder it?"

The brunette rubbed at her nose, the tips of her ears turning slightly pink. "Well, all chickens are technically murdered before-"

"Okay, yeah. Point taken", Jonathan interrupted, waving her half hearted protests away, "Do you have anything else to eat. I can't let you eat that chicken in good conscience."

The girl turned her gaze back to her little paper bag and dug her hands in. She squinted slightly, her lips pressing together as she pulled out a small baggie of smashed baby carrots. Jonathan took in the paltry food, feeling his chest contract slightly. He knew what it was like, not having much to eat, let alone anything good. Without a second thought, he dug his hand into his own lunch bag and pulled out his slightly crumbling brownie.

Sammy noticed what he was doing and immediately began to protest. "No, no you don't have to do that-"

"Take it", Jonathan insisted, holding out the pastry to the girl beside him.

"No, you were excited-"

"I'm never excited", the boy grumbled good naturedly, feeling his eyes stray from Sammy awkwardly, "Just- just take it."

Sammy seemed to be having a debate with herself in her head before she awkwardly reached out and grabbed the brownie from his hands. She really must have been hungry. She slowly pulled bits of the chocolate pastry off and popped them into her mouth, seeming to make the food last. Jonathan turned his gaze away from her and towards his lunch, a simple ham sandwich that he slowly bit into. The two lapsed into silence as they made their way through their lunches. It was painfully clear neither of them knew how to hold a lunchtime conversation.

"Does- uh, does your mom really think you've got a crush on me?"

Jonathan nearly choked on his last bite of sandwich. He coughed up the bits of ham stuck in his throat and spit them into his hand. Swiping the saliva and pits of meat onto his jeans, he avoided eye contact at all costs. "Um- uh, I mean- she talks a lot and- and she thinks that just talking to a girl means-"

"Woah there, Sparky", Sammy rushed in, waving her hands in surrender with a smile creeping onto her face, "I was just trying to break the tension. No need to die on my account."

The boy chuckled uncomfortably, still wiping at his jeans as if there was more spit on his hand. "It's- it's cool. And don't call me Sparky."

Sammy huffed, clearly trying to move past the awkward exchange. "Well, I'll just have to keep testing names out. You'll succumb eventually."

"Please don't", Jonathan chuckled, allowing the moment to pass, if only a little uncomfortably.

"Well", she muttered, turning towards her backpack, "I suppose I should give you the promised junk food for your brother."

Jonathan turned towards her, raising is eyebrows in mild surprise. "You really did that?"

She turned back, a take out box in her grip and held out towards him. "Yeah. I mean, I said I would."

The boy gently tugged the box out of her hands, setting it down by his own bag and letting the awkwardness settle back over him. "You have a shift tonight?"

"Nope", she responded, leaning back on the wall, "Free night tonight. Rarely happens on a friday."

"Any major plans?", Jonathan inquired curiously.

"Yeah, I'm gonna paint the town red", the brunette quipped, turning her eyes on him, "I finished my homework already, so I've got pretty much nothing to to until tomorrow afternoon."

Jonathan eyed her curiously before glancing back at the take out box of pizza. A small idea formed in the back of his head. He knew it would give his mother all the wrong ideas. "You- you could give it to Will yourself."

"Huh?", she responded, swiping curls from her forehead.

"Uh", he muttered, doubling down on the offer despite everything inside him telling him to forget it, "Will and his friends are doing a campaign at our house tonight. It would make Will happy to see you

again. And I figure you know it would make my mom very happy to see me hanging out with someone, so- I mean, if you don't want to-"

"No!", Sammy cut him off, scratching at her nose like she always did, "I mean- yeah. Yeah, that sounds cool. Been wondering about how this whole Dungeons and Dragons thing works, anyway. I'll- uh, I could ride my bike over."

"I'll just give you a ride", Jonathan offered, shrugging, "Just meet me in the parking lot, we'll- uh, we can pick up the boys and- and there's dinner, so… I mean, it's day old pizza."

"That sounds great", Sammy insisted, smiling gently over at him, "I promise to prove to your mom we're not dating."

"Oh god, thank you", the boy groaned in gratitude, the beginnings of a laugh in his voice.

The brunette chuckled in response, a smile spreading on her face. "Well, I guess I'll see you after school."

"Yeah, cool", the pale boy responded, a little less stiff.

Shoving herself up onto her feet, Jonathan watched as Sammy snatched up her backpack and the takeout box. She sent him a exaggerated salute before turning on her heel and walking towards her next class, the bell only a few minutes away.

Sammy stood at the front doors of the school, watching as hoards of teens ran towards their cars. It was always pretty funny to see how desperate they were to speed away from the depressing, cinder block building. No one bothered her as she observed, simply sending wafts of hairspray and perfume her direction as they ran right past her. Although she swore she saw King Steve shoot her a glance as he sauntered right by her. Weird.

Before she could think too deeply about it, Sammy felt a tap on her shoulder. She whipped her head around to see Jonathan standing behind her. She smiled up at him, a gesture he returned a little more easily than he had before.

"You ready for out adventure, Stephen King?", she lilted, crossing her arms over her chest.

He squinted down at her. "Stephen King?"

She shrugged, not fully invested in the nickname. "I don't know. You're both pale and weird."

She swore she saw his lips twitch up at that. "Fair. Still no."

Sammy groaned in response, throwing her head back dramatically before looking back up at the pale boy. "Whatever. Does my carriage await?"

He chuckled slightly in response, a breathy sound, before pointing towards his car at the edge of the parking lot. "Just waiting to stick your bike in the back."

The two teens fell into step, catching the attention of Carol, who'd been exchanging saliva with Tommy not even a few seconds ago. She whispered something to her boyfriend, who snickered in response. Both the teens noticed. Sammy immediately flipped them off while Jonathan simply ducked his head and walked a little more quickly to his car.

The two felt a little more secure by the car, Jonathan snatching Sammy's bike from the rack before wheeling it over to Jonathan's beaten up car and shoving it in the trunk along with both of their backpacks. The brunette stepped over to the passenger side and quickly slid into the car a few moments before Jonathan joined her. She leaned back as she felt the engine clatter to life, just watching as the ugly school building crawled away from her line of sight the farther they drove away. Something told her Jonathan felt the same way.

"Uh, you should be careful", the boy in question mumbled, sending her a quick glance before putting his eyes back on the road, "The Party is kind of intense about this stuff. If you need an exit strategy…"

"Party?" Sammy inquired, leaning forward slightly, "I thought this

was just the kids and stuff."

Jonathan gestured awkwardly, something between a sweep of his hand and a shrug. "It is. It's what they boys like to call themselves."

The brunette whistle slightly, slumping back into her seat. "So a bunch of boys who've given themselves a team name. Sounds fun."

"You really don't have to come if-"

"Jonathan", Sammy silenced him, "I said I wanted to come. You can take my word on it."

She watched as her companion seemed to relax slightly, his shoulders a little less tense. She felt a flicker of pride having made the twitchy boy a little less edgy. "Well, we're here anyway. Be prepared."

She felt the car turn into the old middle school parking lot, clearly spotting a group of young boys practically vibrating with excitement. Sammy felt herself smile at the sight of Will, the smallest boy in the group, waving down his brothers car with a face splitting grin on his face. The smile that spread on Jonathan's equally pale face only made the whole image that much more sweet.

"You two are adorable", Sammy gushed, giving Jonathan a simperingly sweet smile.

The boy rolled his eyes, but didn't diminish his thin lipped smile one bit. "Whatever."

They pulled into a parking spot, quickly shutting off the car before Jonathan slid out of the car to the sounds of all four boys calling out to him. Sammy took a moment to watch her kind of friend practically light up as his little brother threw himself into his arms, tugging at his jacket with excitement. The boys voices all muffled together, yelling out at Jonathan as he glanced over at her with a grin still half stuck to his face. Getting the message, Sammy sent him a thumbs up before wrenching her door open and stepping out into the parking lot.

Practically the second her foot hit the pavement, the excited shouts of the young boys vanished. Sammy froze, stuck under the wide eyed

gazes of Will's friends.

"Is…", one of the boys gaped, a curly haired one with a cap stuck on his head and a clear lisp, "Is that a girl?"

"In Jonathan's car?", another one chimed in. This one was dark skinned, clad in a red jacket that looked a few sizes too big for him. He looked more scrutinizing than the other, who just looked like he'd been clubbed over the head.

The curly haired one turned to Jonathan with wide eyes. "Did you know there was a girl in your car?"

"Of course he knew there was a girl in his freaking car", the tallest boy insisted, not taking his eyes off Sammy, "But why were you in his car?"

"Did he kidnap you?", the one in the red jacket inquired.

"Wha- no!", Jonathan stuttered, looking like a fish gasping for water.

"Lucas!", the tall boy hissed once again, smacking his friend on the shoulder, "Don't piss him off. He's Dungeon Master tonight. Do you want to get killed in the first round?"

"I think the more important question is why is there a girl in Jonathan's car?", the curly one insisted, pointing at her like she was some sort of scientific anomaly, "And why couldn't it have been Nancy?"

The tall boy gagged, swiping the cap right off the other boys head. "Gross, man. That's my sister!"

"My brother can make friends", Will piped in defensively, drawing up his small frame as tall as he could, "That's Sammy."

Only Lucas seemed to be listening, as the other two boys were smacking each other around, each yelling out at one another louder than the first time. Lucas sent Sammy a shrug, as if to say this was what she should have expected. Sammy shrugged back, giving him an equally unphased look which he seemed to appreciate. While the boys continued to yell at each other, Jonathan trying to wrangle

them apart, Sammy quickly popped the trunk open and extracted her takeout box, turning towards Will.

"Hey, white knight!", she called out over the boys voices, "I come bearing gifts."

Will turned his attention away from his fighting friends to see Sammy holding out the box of food he'd been promised. His face broke into a grin as he ran straight towards her. "Yeah! Thanks Sammy!"

"She brought you food?", the curly haired boy demanded, "Not fair!"

"Whatever, Dustin", Will taunted, pulling out a slice of lukewarm cheese pizza and shoving a large bite into his mouth, "At least I was nice to her."

"Well, lesson learned, boys", Sammy drawled with a smirk, "Be nice to Sammy, get free food."

Lucas and Dustin groaned, disappointed that they were being given nothing. The taller one slumped over to her, trying to look professional. He stuck his hand out towards her for a shake. "I'm Mike."

"Sammy", the curly haired girl responded, shaking the boys hand firmly and professionally.

Mike scrutinized her, his brown eyes squinting up at her. "Are you trying to become a member of the Party?"

"Dude, she can bring us pizza!", Dustin hissed behind him as if he was convinced Sammy couldn't hear him.

Mike whipped around and shushed him, swatting away the protest before turning back to the teenage girl with a serious look on his face. "This Party is not for the faint of heart."

"I've been told", Sammy quirked an eyebrow, matching Mike's serious demeanor.

"Our Dungeon Master seems to think you're worthy", he continued, keeping his eyes on her, "But I'm being trained to take over, so I need

to make sure you'll fit in with us. Tonight will be your trial."

"I hope I'm worthy", Sammy said seriously, though she was holding down a smile.

"We'll see", Mike concluded, turning back to his friends, "Let's get going, guys."

Sammy pressed her hand to her mouth, muffling a chuckle as the boys filed into the car with reignited excitement. Will sent her a quick smile, mouth still stuffed with pizza. Jonathan nodded at her, a smile tugging at his thin lips as if he was impressed. Sammy nodded right back before making her way back to the passenger seat. The boys were all still talking over each other, making any conversation between the two teen practically impossible. Instead, they lapsed into silence as Jonathan turned the car back on and made his way out of the parking lot and down the road towards his house.

The ride wasn't long. Sammy spent the whole time watching the shops and trees rush past in a blur. She let her mind relax, not having to think about getting to her next shift until tomorrow. She could feel her muscles sink deep into the upholstery of the car, completely relaxed. The ride was over far too soon, as she felt Jonathan poking her in the shoulder as he shut off the car.

"You about to fall asleep?", he lilted, a teasing smile on his face.

Sammy snorted, rubbing at her eyes with one hand and unbuckling her seatbelt with the other. "You're not getting rid of me that easily, Byers."

"Damn", Jonathan moaned dramatically, "I was hoping to just leave you in the car all night."

"Is that sarcasm I detect?", she mocked, wrinkling her nose, "I had no idea you were capable of humor, Film Boy."

"You suck at nicknames", he shot back, sliding out of his seat and into his yard.

"Um, excuse me", Sammy retorted, following him out of the car and down the little stone path towards his porch, "I rock at nicknamese.

You just have no sense of humor."

"That's true", Lucas called out from the porch followed by a chorus of chuckles from the boys.

Jonathan swatted away their comments good naturedly, making his way up the porch. The wood creaked and sunk under their feet while Jonathan opened up the screen door and ushered the Party inside. Immediately following the clatter of their shoes, Sammy could hear a woman's voice greeting them joyfully from inside. She sent a teasing smile to Jonathan, who sent her a warning glare right back.

"This is gonna be fun", she teased.

"Please don't give her any ideas", he retorted, gesturing for her to go inside a little nervously.

With a smirk, Sammy sauntered right into the house with exaggerated confidence. She looked around to see that the house was just slightly bigger than her own, if not slightly messier. Toys were strewn across the ground, t shirts and socks left on the carpet as if they had been thrown around in a haste to leave or get something done. But there was an undeniable sense that this was a home, not a house. Sammy couldn't help but feel slightly jealous. Her house was nothing like this.

As he swaggered to a stop, Sammy's attention was caught by a woman who was now being surrounded by starving boys. They were pawing at her for a bowl of potato chips which she happily handed over.

She looked slightly out of breath as she finally had the bowl extracted from her hands. "Jonathan, can you make sure I turned on the oven. The pizza should be done by-"

She stopped talking as soon as her eyes landed on Sammy, standing a few feet in front of her son. Ms. Byers' eyes widened and face broke into a friendly smile when she realized who she was.

"Oh, goodness", she stated, still out of breath, "Hello. It's great to finally see you."

"Likewise", Sammy responded politely, holding her hand out for a shake, "It's nice to see you again, Ms. Byers."

"Oh, put that away", she insisted, swatting Sammy's hand away gently before pulling her into a hug. The teen let out a slight squeak of surprise, arms hovering as she readjusted herself into the hug. "And you can call me Joyce."

"Mom", Jonathan grumbled, looking embarrassed, "Stop it, please."

"Stop what?", Joyce inquired innocently, her wide brown eyes falling on her son, "I'm just being polite to your friend here."

"Yeah, Jonathan", Sammy teased, turning back to the pale boy, "You should be polite, too. Give your mom a hug."

Jonathan glared right at her, completely unamused by her teasing. Joyce only laughed at her son's face, gently placing a hand on Sammy's shoulder and swiping a stray strand of hair out of her brown eyes.

"Stop torturing the poor boy", she giggled, "I promise not to embarrass you, sweetie. Now both of you, take off your jackets."

Jonathan seemed to bite back a sarcastic comment as he shrugged off his dark jacket and placed it carefully on the coat rack. Sammy followed suit, sliding her worn out jean jacket off her shoulders, leaving her in a flannel that was about three sizes too big. She placed it on the rack beside Jonathan's before turning back to him.

"You ready to show me the magical world of D&D?" she asked cheerily, placing her hands squarely on her hips.

The boy nodded, pointing towards the large table in the next room. "We're playing in there. It might take a while."

"I've got time to spare", she chirped, making her way towards the dining room.

Observing the scratched up table, Sammy took note of all the notebooks spread out. Half chewed pencils were strewn about as the boys quickly claimed chairs, mouths still full of potato chips. Will

looked up at her from his pristinely spread out notebook, waving her over.

"Come sit with me", he offered sweetly, lifting his pencil at the ready for the game.

Sammy smiled back at him, arms swinging as she made her way towards him. "I would be honored."

She plopped down next to Will into a fold out chair, a smile stuck firmly on her face. Jonathan quickly entered the room, his nose stuck in his own notebook as he sunk down into his chair. He quickly arranged his book in front of him so no one else could see with a small smile on his face. As he put everything together, he turned to the boys who were all waiting on the edges of their seats.

"Alright, boys", Jonathan breathed, holding his notebook to his chest, "Are you ready for your latest adventure?"

The boys all exploded into cheers, making Sammy jump slightly. Their excitement was practically electric. Jonathan looked like he'd rather be doing this without all the noise, but no one could deny that he looked happy to be there. He chuckled nervously as he pulled his notebook closer to his line of sight, ready to begin.

"Pay attention, Mike", he stated, "You'll be doing your very own campaign soon."

Mike nodded seriously, fighting to keep his face straight while still practically bouncing in his seat.

The game went on like that. Joyce had placed pizza in front of them with a sweet smile to match her youngest sons. The boys shouted out moves and actions at lightning speed. Sammy had been hit in the head with dice on more than one occasion. She still rubbed at a particularly sore spot she swore would swell by tomorrow. But all of it was just so electric, joyful. She'd never been around so many happy people before, it was intoxicating. She called out moves for Will every once in a while, which he happily complied to. Dustin had called out that Will was cheating for listening to someone else.

"You're just mad cause you're stuck in the mirror room", Will taunted as Dustin continued to moan.

"Whatever, shithead", Dustin spat back, face contorted into a pout that would make a puppy weep.

Sammy giggled once again, looking around the table to see that the plates were all empty and covered in grease. None of the boys paid any attention to the mess, all having the red grease smeared across their own faces. On impulse, the young girl started snatching up all the plates and stacking them up in her hands. Jonathan seemed to notice, breaking at the end of another bout of instructions for the boys.

"Hey", he whispered so the Party wouldn't hear, "You don't have to do that."

"It's fine", Sammy whispered back, waving him off, "I'll help your mom out for a few minutes and I'll be back."

The boy simply shrugged, knowing he wasn't going to talk her out of it. Turning away from the table, Sammy quietly made her way into the kitchen where she saw Joyce cleaning the sheet she'd cooked the pizza on. Her dark hair fell over her eyes and suds stuck to her cheeks in a way that was incredibly familiar to the younger girl.

"Hey, Joyce", she greeted, placing the plates in the sink and reaching for a sponge.

The older woman looked over at her, immediately opening her mouth to tell her that she didn't have to help. Sammy immediately waved off her words, getting to work at scrubbing the old plate.

"You really shouldn't", Joyce insisted, reaching over to take the sponge out of Sammy's hand. However, Sammy just pulled it out of her reach and sent her a reassuring smile.

"No need", she stated kindly, returning to the plate, "You let me come over, it's the least I can do."

Much like her son, Joyce seemed to know that there was no getting the sponge out of Sammy's hands. Instead, she gave her a grateful

smile before turning back to the greasy sheet before her. The two stood there for a few moments, listening to the boys in the other room shouting over each other with increasing mania.

"So", Joyce drawlled carefully, turning her brown eyes onto Sammy, "You and Jonathan seem to be getting along quite well."

Sammy shrugged in response. "We work together most days. He's nice."

A glint shone in Joyce's eyes, making her look like a teen looking for gossip. "So, are the two of you… you know, interested?"

Sammy snorted slightly. Jonathan certainly had warned her, and she wasn't about to let him down no matter how fun it would be to torture him on this. "Sorry to disappoint. We're just friends."

Joyce dramatically sunk her shoulders, shaking her head with a smile on her face. "Well, that's too bad. But I'm glad he has a friend around, especially one as sweet as you. He hasn't got many of those."

"I noticed", Sammy responded instantly. Her eyes widened as soon as the words left her mouth, turning to Joyce apologetically. "I mean- I mean we're in the same boat. Neither of us has a lot of friends, and I- I know what it's like- I mean-"

"Woah there", Joyce cut her off, a small smile on her soft face, "It's okay, sweetie. I know all about Jonathan, and I still mean what I said. I'm so glad he has a friend around."

Still wholly embarrassed, Sammy just nodded jerkily and turned back to the pile of plates in the sink only to see she'd finished them all. She awkwardly pointed at the pile and was about to continue to stutter her way through an explanation when an explosion of noise came from the dining room. The boys cheered and ran around the room, jumping up and down. Jonathan was trying to calm them all down with no effect.

"Looks like the game is over", Joyce quipped, smiling back over at the teen beside her, "They boys moms will be here soon to pick them up."

Sammy was about to respond when Mike sauntered in, his face

flushed with excitement but still trying to look imposing. He came to a stop in front of the teen girl, brown eyes looking her up and down.

"You've passed the trial", he stated importantly, squaring his shoulders, "You are welcome in the Party. We'll teach you the rules next time."

"I'm honored", Sammy smiled, giving the young boy a salute. He stifled a giggle before turning back towards the dining room and calling out after his friends.

Jonathan slumped into the room, looking exhausted from all the energy the boys were giving off. He looked over at Sammy, nodding towards the door. "The game's over. I can give you a ride back-"

"Oh, that's fine", the girl cut him off, wiping her hands on her jeans, "Just pop the trunk and give me my bike."

"Sweetie, it's almost midnight", Joyce noted, placing her hands on her hips and turning towards her son, "Jonathan, give her a ride home."

"It's really okay", Sammy insisted, making her way towards the door and snatching her jacket off of the coat rack.

Jonathan followed her out onto the porch, leaving his jacket inside. "It's no problem. I can take you home."

"Really, I'm fine", Sammy pressed, sauntering over to the car and popping the trunk open, "I'm a big girl, Johnny Boy. Besides, I don't live far."

"You sure?", he asked nervously, looking back at his house where Joyce was spying out of the window.

"Very sure", she stated, grabbing her bike and dropping it down onto the ground, "I'll see you at work."

Before he could try and convince her again, Sammy hopped onto her bike and pedaled away towards the road. She turned and waved at him, giving him a wide smile before making her way past the trees and down the road towards her own house. As the cold air bit into her cheeks and knuckles, she couldn't help the warm feeling in her

belly that this night had given her. Having a friend definitely had it's perks.

A/N: So... I'm alive? Kinda? Maybe? Depends. So yeah, that took a while. I can honestly say that I had complete writers block for this chapter, and now that it's gone I can actually move forward with the story so yay! Also I got a weirdly large response for my Game of Thrones story so I felt obligated to work on that more (check it out if you're bored I guess). Hope I haven't lost you guys. My girl Sammy is alive and well and I'm ready to push the story forward.

candy95: They definitely warm up to each other :D

Guest: You warm my heart and I'm so happy you like my precious Sammy! Hope I haven't lost ya!

RebornRose1992: You make me blush!

AugustRrush: Hope I didn't disappoint :D

sophiewhettingsteel: Girl, I ain't giving up on my girl. Sammy is here to stay. Actually, this comment got me to get off my ass and actually sit down and write, so mega thanks to you!

6. King Steve

The smell of grease burned Sammy's nostrils and she dumped another basket of fries into the tub next to her. It was almost dinner rush at Benny's and she was feeling the heat. Sweat dripped down the sides of her face and matted in her hair as she rushed back and forth between the deep fryer and the grill. The grease pits and grills were working full time and every cook in the kitchen looked like they were being boiled alive.

"I've got an order for a double bacon burger!", called out one of the waiters, Kyle, sticking his order on the line. When he noticed Sammy stuck behind the counter, he squinted at her curiously. "What the hell are you doing back there? You can't cook for shit."

"Ha ha", she deadpanned, dropping a basket of fries onto the counter, "I'm just working the fryer. No poisonings today."

"Yeah", Kyle shrugged, tucking a strand of red hair behind his ear, "But that doesn't answer the question."

"I'm not cooking", Sammy clarified, "I'm still waiting tables. Benny just asked for help getting the fries ready before the rush."

Whether he hadn't been listening or just didn't care, Kyle didn't give any indication that he heard her and snatched up the fries she had set down before moving towards his table. Annoyed but lacking the energy to care, Sammy sighed and swung back around into the kitchen to snatch up her notepad and apron. All the wanted to do was sit down in the back of the kitchen and let her legs rest. Instead, she swiped away the sweat from her hairline and pushed her way out of the kitchen.

Her shoes squeaked against the linoleum floor as she made her way from table to table. Several old men had tried to squeeze her ass and one old lady had already made a two minute long complaint on the state of how young women dressed, eyeing Sammy's baggy jeans with distaste. Everyone else just complained on a normal level. It all blurred into white noise as the hours passed and more and more people poured in. As the chatter turned into a cluster headache,

Sammy made her way over to the counter where Benny was flipping burgers.

"Can I please go back in the kitchen?", she groaned, tacking up her latest orders.

Benny glanced up at her, clearly unamused. "Not if I want all my customers going home with food poisoning."

"Oh don't be so dramatic", the girl retorted, leaning closer over the edge, "It was one time. How long are you gonna hold that over my head?"

"As long as you're working here", he shot back, giving her a big fake smile that only served to annoy her.

Sammy opened her mouth, ready to keep the argument going so she could avoid the rush of customers coming in. Hell, at this point she'd do anything to avoid them. As she was about to quip out another remark, she felt a tap on her shoulder. She turned her head to see Kyle, looking like he'd rather jump off the cliff in the woods than be working another minute. He glared at her, dead in the eyes as he pointed over his shoulder.

"Someone's asking for ya", he muttered.

Sammy followed his finger to see that he was pointing towards the drinks counter, where none other than Steve Harrington was leaning against a chair as if he owned the place. She felt her brows pull together as she slowly took in the fact that Steve- King Steve was asking for her. What in the hell…

Slowly, as if the whole thing was just some sort of trick, Sammy made her way towards the counter. Steve hadn't noticed her moving towards him, instead looking out at the customers with mild interest. When she made it up to him and he didn't turn towards her, she coughed slightly to get his attention. As soon as she did, he turned his head towards her and shot her what must have been his most charming smile. All it did for her was make her want to turn right back around and hide in the kitchen.

"Um…", she muttered, feeling lanky and awkward in front of the most popular boy in school, "Hi?"

"Well hello, gorgeous", he lilted confidently, turning to completely face her, "I've been looking for you."

Sammy stood shock still, eyes wide. This was… not what she was expecting.

"Is- is this about your shoes?", she stuttered, barely able to find her voice, "The tomato sauce thing? 'Cause I'm- I'm sorry about that. Well, not really, but I- I mean-"

"Dude, that was like, almost two months ago", he interrupted smoothly, leaning forward in a way that he must have thought was charming, "And if I remember correctly, it wasn't just my shoes you ruined."

Sammy felt her nostrils flare as she ducked her head, wholly uncomfortable. "Well, you were being a dick, so..."

Steve chuckled, a strand of his carefully tousled hair falling over his eyes. "Yeah well, I suppose you'll have to forgive me."

Sammy looked up from behind her hair, quirking an eyebrow with a completely unamused look on her face. "Why?"

"Because, beautiful", he stated with an aura of drama, like he was performing to an adoring audience, "I come here today with a proposition."

He paused, waiting for her to question him. Instead, Sammy simply stared at him with a bored expression. At her silence, Steve seemed to slump a little bit. The lack of reassurance seemed to flatten him slightly. He stuffed his hands in his pockets and leaned back on his heels, no longer performing.

"Look", he said simply, "I need to pass some finals for some classes that I haven't exactly been doing so hot in. I figured you're the girl to ask."

The girl squinted at him as if he were an animal in a zoo. "Why the

hell are you asking me? You're a year above me. I don't even take the same classes."

"Actually, you do", he shrugged, his expensive looking jacket straining against his shoulders, "Don't think I haven't seen you reading all that weird chemistry shit in the library. You're getting a jump on next years classes."

"Well, how do you know if I'm any good?" she demanded, starting to feel cornered again.

"Science genius Samantha Thompson can't figure out chemistry?" he snarked, smirking down at her, "I may not be Einstein, but that's not a hard formula to figure out. Teachers practically cream their pants when you're brought up."

Sammy squared her shoulders, still confused. "Thanks for that image, asshole. But why me? There are about twenty people at least who would jump at the chance to tutor King Steve."

The taller boy looked down at her, seeming to sink into the conversation much easier than she thought he might. "I figured you'd be more discreet."

"Discreet?", she questioned, crossing her arms.

Steve shrugged again, making the point simple. "You don't want to be seen with me, and I don't want to be seen with a tutor. I've got a reputation to uphold, you know."

"What?", Sammy snorted, glaring up at the much taller boy, "You don't want to be seen with the school's resident trailer trash?"

"You hit the nail on the head", he shot back, a rather unpleasant smirk lifting up the corner of his lips.

Stepping closer to Steve, Sammy ran through the whole idea. "So you want me to tutor you after school and pretend I've never spoken to you when we're in public?"

The boy nodded, as if the whole thing made perfect sense to him. "Yeah."

"How much are you paying?" Sammy demanded. She had absolutely no time for bullshit.

He straightened up, looking down his pointed nose at her. "Five bucks an hour."

"Bullshit", she spat back, glaring straight into his eyes, "Ten bucks. Take it or leave it."

He snorted, leaning back on his heels. "Oh, come on. You can't be-"

"You want to pass your classes?" Sammy interrupted, "I can make that happen. And I can keep your precious reputation intact while I'm at it. Money's not an issue for you, so pay up or find someone else."

Steve glared down at her, somehow simultaneously annoyed and intrigued. "Fine. We'll meet up tomorrow morning at the library. Don't be late."

Sending her one last sarcastic smile, Steve sauntered away towards the door.

"You're a dick, Steve Harrington", Sammy yelled at him as he pushed the door open.

"You'll learn to love me, Gorgeous", he yelled back.

Sammy stared at the door he'd just left through, confused as hell. At least she was going to make some extra money to pay off the gas bill.

7. Daddy Issues

Sammy lay sprawled out on the linoleum floor of the gas station, knees bent up to the ceiling as she watched the fluorescent lights buzz above her. One curl lay irritably on her forehead as she tried to blow it off without having to move with little success. It just kept flopping right back into her brown eyes. The only thing running through her head was the final exams coming up in a few days, and she needed to keep everything straight.

"What does the pig's head symbolize?" Jonathan asked from his position behind the register, his English notes open in front of him.

"Uh", Sammy groaned, "The darkness in humanity?"

She heard her friend scribble a few more notes. "Can you elaborate?"

"It- uh, it is a symbol for the devil", she tried, running her hands over her forehead in frustration, "Because all the boys went insane and… had bad impulses?"

"You call murdering each other bad impulses?" the sandy haired boy chuckled.

"Okay, you know English is my worst class", Sammy shot back, letting her hand drop to the floor, "Who cared was a freaking decapitated pig symbolizes? How is that gonna help me in life?"

"Don't trash talk English", Jonathan shot back, "That's the only class I can tolerate besides Photography. And you've still got a B, anyway."

"A B is not good enough for a full ride to a pre-med program", she rattled off, "Keep asking me about symbolic pig devils."

"God, you're the worst person to tutor", he grumbled, flipping through his notes.

Sammy snorted. "Nope. That title belongs to Steve."

She heard the page he was turning stop mid-flip. The feeling of Jonathan's eyes on her made her look up at him, still laying on the

floor.

"You're tutoring Steve Harrington?", he asked, face a little sour.

Sammy shrugged, pushing herself up onto her elbows. "Yeah. He asked me to get him through his finals for ten bucks an hour."

"Why would you take that job?" Jonathan asked, "That's the guy who filled Martha Gorchezki's backpack with Mountain Dew and told the whole school she peed herself when it spilled out."

"I took the job because it was ten bucks and hour and I need it", the brunette insisted, dropping back down onto her back, "And he's not the worst person I've tutored. He hasn't tried to grope me, at least."

Jonathan leaned over the counter, his face set. "If he ever tries that, tell me. I'll kick his ass."

Sammy could feel a smile spread across her face. Her voice came out syrupy and sarcastic. "Aw, you're protective of me."

"Of course I am", he shrugged, "You're the only semi cool person in the town."

"Semi?", she chuckled, "I'm the coolest person you know."

She nestles further against the cold floor, letting her muscles relax and the comfortable silence fall over the two teens. It stayed like that for what must have only been a few minutes when she heard a click from across the room. Curious and bored out of her mind, Sammy lifted her head, curls falling back down to her shoulders, and looked over to see Jonathan stuffing something behind the register. She felt her brows furrow together as she sent a questioning look over to the pale boy across from her.

"You taking pictures of me, Johnny?" she lilted, raising a brow at the boy.

Sammy watched as the tips of his ears turned bright pink. She felt her lips turn up into a small smile as she watched him try to stutter out an explanation. "Well I- I was just- you know, I was bored and- did you just call me Johnny?"

The brunette shrugged, still smirking over at her coworker. "Hey, you were the one taking creepy photos of me. I can call you whatever I want."

"Too simple. And they were not creepy", Jonathan defended, though he looked a little unsure of himself, "I just… it was a good shot."

"You know, you can just ask if you want", the brunette offered, pushing herself up and draping her arms over her knees, "Wouldn't have said no."

Jonathan kept his gaze on her, looking like he was relaxing into the conversation ever so slightly. "It was a candid. Would have ruined the shot."

"Still creepy", Sammy shrugged, laying back down onto the cold white floor.

"Stop calling it creepy", Jonathan grumbled, his voice echoing slightly in the empty air.

"You say tomato, I say tomahto", Sammy lilted, smile now pressed firmly into her cheeks. A small chuckle rippled through her chest as she heard the boy sigh. She lay there in the silence for a few more seconds before pushing herself back onto her feet with a groan and sauntering towards Jonathan.

"Shift's almost over", she sighed, leaning over the counter, "What've you got planned?"

"Sleep", he said simply.

Sammy groaned, leaning her head back in mock ecstacy. "Oh, sleep. An elusive little vixen. I wish I could know her, if only for a night."

"Gross", her friend chuckled, his smile coming in crooked which Sammy couldn't help but match.

"I'm just not looking forward to biking home", she grumbled, pushing her hair out of her face, "It's humid as shit tonight and I'm gonna sweat out half my body weight."

"The offer still stands for me to give you a ride home."

Sammy felt her face drop slightly. She really didn't want Jonathan to see her house.

"Nah, it's okay", she insisted, feeling her nose itch, "It's, y'know, a ways away and all that. I'll be fine."

Jonathan eyed her, turning to face her fully with a confused look on his face. "Do you live in a swamp or something? Is that why I can never see your place?"

"What? No!" Sammy giggled, quickly punching Jonathan in the shoulder.

"So what is it?" he insisted, "Super strict dad?"

The brunette snorted. "Definitely not strict."

"Then let me give you a ride, dammit!" he insisted, a smile taking over his whole face. It made his cheeks stick out.

"Fine!", Sammy relented, throwing her hands up and feeling her face heat up, "Just drop me off. And only because it's so freaking hot outside."

Jonathan drummed his hands against the table, looking smug. His nose scrunched up like a little boy, face alight with the smug sense that he finally broke her down.

"You better wipe that look off your face before we go", the brunette quipped, reaching out and poking her finger between his eyes. That easily broke the tension before each of them agreed to finish cleaning up the store before they left, a task they had neglected to do their entire shift.

Jonathan had been driving for almost ten minutes. Sammy lived farther out of town than he did. Houses started to fade out, each becoming further and further apart, and fare more run down. With each house they passed, the girl seemed to shrink another inch into her seat. He could feel her eyes glance at him from time to time,

seemingly trying to see what he thought.

"It's not much farther", she placated quietly, rubbing her nose reflexively, "Only two more down."

Jonathan nodded, seeing another house whiz by. A few broken down cars decorated the lawn.

"It's really quiet out here", he said kindly, or at least he hoped it sounded that way, "Must be nice."

"Yeah", Sammy sighed, sinking further down, "Love that quiet. Thanks for the ride, though. Really. You can just drop me off at the front."

"That's the plan", he responded just as they pulled into the driveway.

Jonathan peered out the windshield at the house. The place looked sunken, the brown walls heavy and roof about to cave in at any moment. One window was boarded up with cardboard, cracks too wide to fix with duct tape. The lawn was dried out and sickly looking, a few patches of green to break up the otherwise dusty brown look of the whole place. It was wide though, stretching a few acres towards empty space. And there was a man laying in the front lawn, sprawled out in the dry grass.

"Hey, Sammy", the boy said slowly, not taking his eyes off the unconscious man, "There's someone in your hard. They might be dead."

Suddenly, Sammy's eyes widened, following his gaze to see the man laying on the ground. Her mouth opened and closed like a fish, quickly scrambling to unbuckle herself. "No, that's- uh, I can- no…"

She scrambled out of the car, almost falling onto her knees in her haste. Jonathan quickly followed suit, pulling himself out of the car and following his friend towards the man. However, Sammy seemed to try and outrun him, stepping in front of the man and trying to cover up the sight of him.

"Hey, you can- it's cool", she stumbled, trying to pull a smile, "I'll take care of it."

"Sammy if you need help-"

"Nope, I'm fine-"

"Seriously, I don't feel comfortable-"

"I said I'm fine-"

"Sammy?"

The two teens shut up when the heard the man on the ground grumble out the girl's name. His bloodshot eyes peered up at the girl with a dopey smile. He was so clearly drunk Jonathan could smell the cheap beer on his clothes. He reached his hand up, as if trying to grab onto her. "Hey sweetie. How was work?"

The girl's face fell, turning towards the man on the ground. "Um, it was fine."

"Is this the boy you told me about?" he asked, eyes landing on Jonathan before twisting up his face into a mock stern expression, "What are your intentions with my daughter?"

Realization dawned on Jonathan. His chest twisted with embarrassment when he saw Sammy's face flush so deep the tips of her ears were red. She didn't look him in the eye as her shoulders hunched up and hair fell over her face.

"Hey", the older man slurred, dropping his beer can down on the ground, "At least Hopper didn't catch me. No drunk tank tonight. I'm getting better at this."

Sammy huffed through her nose, looking up at the sky for a brief moment, as if collecting herself, before stretching a big fake smile on her face and responding, "That's really good, dad. Thanks for that. Now please go inside."

Jonathan watched as the man on the ground childishly turned on his side, refusing to move. The teen turned to his friend, hands in his pockets.

"I can help you", he offered quietly, catching the brunette's attention,

"Take him inside, I mean. I can help you get him to bed."

Sammy looked over at him, the darkness barely covering her pinched face and shuffling feet. She quickly nodded at him before kneeling down to tuck her hands underneath her father's arms. Jonathan quickly followed suit and grabbed the man's ankles.

The two teens hoisted the drunk man up and began to drag him inside the trailer. He was limp, weighing more than several sacks of potatoes and was either too drunk or too stubborn to move. They dragged him up the small set of stairs and through the little hall all the way to what must have been his room. The inside was just as sad looking as the outside, the walls peeling and rug frayed beyond repair. A few sports supplies lay against the walls as the only decoration.

Jonathan's nose crinkled against the stale smell that overpowered the room. Beer cans lay crushed all across the floor. Sammy just kicked them aside as she continued to pull her father towards his bed. They threw him gently atop the mattress, where he curled in on himself like a child having a bad dream.

Almost immediately, Sammy retreated out of of the room. Jonathan quickly followed suit, trying to keep up with her as she made her way to the front door. Her backpack lay sprawled against the wall and he noticed the coat hanger was sagging under the sheer amount of flannels she probably owned.

Sammy threw the door open, breaking his concentration and gesturing outside. "Well, thank you for that. I don't wanna keep you, so…"

Jonathan's brows pulled together. "Are you telling me to leave?"

"No", the girl insisted, her hair still falling wildly over her face, "I'm not- that's not what I'm-"

"You don't have to be embarrassed" Jonathan said, trying to get her to stop acting so weird, "It's not a big deal."

Her eyes flicked up to his, face slack. "It's not a big deal that I'm the

daughter of the town drunk?"

The boy shrugged. "My dad fought your dad pretty hard for that title."

"He's not…", she muttered, swiping back her hair to reveal her still blushing face, "He's not a mean drunk or anything. It's not a big deal. He just… didn't know how to cope after my mom…"

Jonathan nodded, not wanting to force Sammy to talk if she didn't want to. Instead, he let his eyes travel over the open room. His hands wrung together as he looked at the sad assortment of sports supplies. He could see a sliver of what must be Sammy's room. A large black poster with a pair of red lips reading *Rocky Horror* and stray books scattered across the carpeted floor were all he could see. A shrine of photos was up on a wall, all of a dark haired woman with semi-heavy eye makeup and long dark hair. He quickly noted that it must be Sammy's mom. A few of them featured her with a guitar, some with a bald head. Only a few featured a small Sammy, gap toothed and smiling. Instead of bringing attention to them, he quickly turned back towards the stack of sports supplies in the corner.

"What are those?", he asked politely.

"Um", she mumbled, stepping away from the door, "That's for field hockey. Kind of. Dad was the star of Hawkins High's field hockey team. Never got the skills kind of played hockey on grass for all intents and purposes."

"Hey", he said quietly, placing his hand around the old wooden stick, "How about you show me how it works?"

Sammy raised her eyebrows at him, a small smile tugging at her lips. "You want to learn how to play field hockey?", she inquired sarcastically, placing her hands on her hips.

Jonathan nodded a little too enthusiastically. "Yeah, totally", he insisted with a smile, "Come on, I know you can't help showing off."

Sammy's smile grew and she let out a little laugh. "Fine", she relented, grabbing the large metal stick off of its perch, "But just

remember, I play to win."

"Noted", Jonathan chuckled, happy to see her smile again.

Stick in hand, Sammy jerked her head towards the yard. "Come on, weirdo", she said, heading out the door, Jonathan close behind.

"C'mon, Jonathan!", Sammy taunted from the goal, smacking the ball back and forth with her hockey stick, "You can do better than that."

"You better watch it", Jonathan shot back, smile stretching across his face as he made a dash towards the brunette in an attempt to get the ball. She seemed to have anticipated what he was going to do, and spun out of his way and past him towards his goal. Jonathan spun on his heel and started to run towards her, trying in vain to get ahead of her before she could make a goal. She lined up her shot with him merely a foot behind her and smacked the ball straight in the middle of the goal.

Sammy threw up her arms and jumped up and down, cheering like a child.

"Thank you for being so humble in victory", panted Jonathan, trying to catch his breath.

In response, Sammy stuck out her tongue at him and began to do a little victory dance that consisted of hopping up and down and shaking her hips. Her arms flailed from side to side in some strange combination of a disco move and the twist.

"Much better", he deadpanned, trying to keep the smile off his face.

Sammy continued to shake her hips and laugh, her hair flying in every direction. She shot Jonathan a smug smile and finally settled her feet on the ground, ending her little dance.

"Hey", Jonathan started, finally catching his breath, "How about you stay at my place tonight?"

Sammy turned to him, her smile dimming as she came back down to Earth. "I have to stay here and watch my dad", she responded simply,

holding her stick in both hands.

"He's already in bed", retorted Jonathan, pointing towards the room they had set her father in not too long ago, "He'll be fine. And it's a the weekend. Besides, I have Evil Dead on VHS. I can finally get you to watch it."

The brunette looked like she was thinking it over, still unconvinced.

"Please", the boy pleaded, laying his stick on the ground and walking closer to the girl in front of him, "It's just one night. I promise you'll be home in time to check on him. I'll drive you back myself."

Sammy looked up and him, obviously trying to hold back a smile, but her dimples gave it away. The sight of it made him smile.

"Okay, fine", she relented, making Jonathan smile wider, "Only because you promised we can watch Evil Dead."

Joyce didn't want to disturb the teens in her living room. She could tell they were trying to be quiet, but the little shrieks and laughs were hard to miss. Joyce couldn't help the smile it brought to her face. But they had been quiet for a good hour at this point, and Joyce was hungry.

She opened her door slowly, consciously trying to keep it from squeaking. As she tiptoed over the carpeted floor towards the kitchen, she caught sight of Jonathan and Sammy.

The two teens had curled into each other. Jonathan had one arm wrapped around Sammy's shoulders and the other had fallen down onto her hip. Sammy had tucked her head into Jonathan's shoulder and her arm was wrapped around his middle with one leg thrown over his, a small trail of drool on the corner of her mouth and staining Jonathan's shirt. The static light from the TV shone over them, making them look like something out of an old film.

Joyce felt a wicked idea form in her head, bringing a smile to her face. She reached over to the windowsill where Jonathan's camera was perched. Slowly, as not to wake the two kids, she brought the

camera up to her eyes and focused the lense. Unsure of whether she was doing it right, she pressed the button on top. The camera clicked without flash and she had caught the picture.

Will was going to have a field day with this once Joyce showed him.

8. Psycho & Trailer Trash

"Check it out, Gorgeous!"

Sammy nearly jumped out of her chair, hearing Steve run up behind her. It was far too early in the morning for his antics, and she was about ready to toss her orange juice in his face for making so much noise. "What the hell, Steve?"

"First of all, I brought a present", he stated proudly, dropping a white paper bag in front of her, "Two old fashioned doughnuts. I never see you eat breakfast and you definitely deserve it at this point."

The girl looked uncomfortably at the bag of food, confused as all hell. "Uh, what?"

"I said check it out", he insisted, smile wide on his face as he brandished a piece of paper in her face, "Solid C plus. You are a damn miracle worker. Hence the doughnuts."

The girl's eyes widened, snatching the paper out of his hands. He seemed to be preening with pride, rocking back and forth on his heels. "Wow! I mean- I didn't expect that."

His eyebrows ticked up, smirk firm on his face. "Wow, good to know you had so much faith in me."

"Can you blame me?", she retorted, handing him back the paper.

"I guess not", he relented, his overly styled hair falling in his eyes a bit.

"Well, I will say that I am...", Sammy struggled to find the right words, or even get them out of her mouth, "Strangely proud of you."

"That's good to hear, Gorgeous", he responded jovially, a wicked smile forming, "Maybe next year I'll even admit you're my tutor. And now you hold up your end of the bargain."

"What end of the…", the brunette's eyes almost immediately rolled back in her head when she remembered what he was referring to,

"Oh, come on. You can't seriously still be insisting on this."

"A promise is a promise, Gorgeous", he smirked, tapping her on the nose with far too much familiarity, "And I'm holding you to it."

Sammy wondered how the hell she let herself get into this situation.

She sat on the toilet, a ball of toilet paper wadded up in her fist as she listened half-creepily to Nancy and her friend Barb gossiping at the sinks. The whole thing felt weird and invasive and she wanted to pull up her pants and leave. But she needed something to tell Steve to keep him from failing. Surprisingly, the promise of information kept him in line and focused. He'd started to pull a C average.

"Did you see what Carol was wearing today?", she heard Nancy gush, "That top was to die for."

Barb snorted, washing her hands. "Maybe that's what she sold her soul for."

Sammy was starting to like Barb, but this was getting her nowhere. She had better things to do. Today was career counseling day and she had her session coming up.

Ten minutes. Ten minutes on the fucking toilet with her jeans around her ankles and nothing to show for it. Just talk about Carol's clothes and a few anecdotes about their biology class. The amount of time she was spending on the toilet was starting to get weird.

"You shouldn't talk like that", Nancy scolded her friend, "You'll start to sound like Samantha Thompson."

The curly haired girl's ears perked up at the mention of her name. What the hell had she meant?

"I'm pretty sure she goes by Sammy" Barb pointed out.

"How would I know?" her friend shrugged, the sink groaning as she presumably leaned back against it, "But you know what they say about her. You don't want people saying that about you."

"I don't think anyone's going to start calling me trailer trash anytime soon."

Sammy felt her chest wind up into a knot. Her fist tightened around the toilet paper, trying to keep it from shaking. It wasn't like she was unaware of her reputation, but she didn't particularly enjoy hearing it firsthand.

Nancy, to her dismay, seemed to want to continue the conversation. "I heard she's been drinking since she was twelve. I mean, it would explain why she's so angry all the time."

"With a dad like hers I wouldn't be surprised" Barb shrugged.

At the mention of her father, Sammy decided she was sick of hearing this. She quickly pulled up her tattered jeans and flushed. The old stall door was incredibly loud and hurt her ears as she swung it open, drawing the attention of the two other girls. Their eyes landed on her, making Sammy freeze up for a brief second. She did not like the way they looked at her, the way everyone looked at her. Like she was some whole other species. Both of them had some traces of shame on their faces. Good.

"Do I have something on my face?" Sammy snapped, glaring back at the girls.

Her comment broke through their stares, with Nancy having the good grace to look embarrassed. Barb just looked uncomfortable. She quickly tried to smile over at her as Sammy walked over to the sink, clearly hoping she hadn't heard their conversation.

"You'd better wash your hands", she pointed out, "This place is a cesspool of bacteria not yet discovered by man."

Neither girl seemed to know what to say to that. Sammy could feel her face twist into a scowl as she started running the water and rubbing her hands together with the school's cheap soap.

"That's a nice shirt", Nancy offered politely, uncomfortable smile firmly on her face, "Very… rocker."

Sammy's eyes fell down onto her own shirt, an old Iggy Pop tee she'd

managed to find at Goodwill. The thing was falling apart at the seams, more likely to turn into rags within the month. Nothing compared to the other girls' nice blouses and skirts.

"Not nearly as nice as yours", she responded with a harsh smile, "But it's the best we trailer trash can do."

The color drained from Nancy's face, her eyes falling to the floor. "I-I'm sorry about that."

Sammy nodded, hair falling over her forehead. "I'm sure you are."

"Are you doing anything later?"

Barb immediately swatted her shorter friend's shoulder, giving her an incredulous look. Even Nancy looked surprised at what she'd said. It would be funny if it didn't make Sammy feel so small.

"Actually yes", she retorted, trying to keep the hurt out of her voice, "I'm going to see Rocky Horror with my friend Jonathan."

"Byers?", Barb inquired, a little judgmentally. It sent a flare of protectiveness up Sammy's spine.

She turned her head, hair flying over her shoulder. "Yes. Byers. You got a problem with that?"

The redhead's hands went up in the air, as if she were actually nervous Sammy would hit her. "No problem at all."

The silence fell back over the group of three girls. It dug its way into Sammy's skin, making her itch. Without another glance at them, Sammy slumped her way out of the bathroom. Her feet slapped against the linoleum floor as she made her way towards the counselors office. Might as well get there early.

The room itself did nothing to improve her mood. Her eyes scanned over the bland decorations, the generic motivational posters on the wall and a diploma from the local community college. It was a sad sight that she had little interest in. The guidance counselor herself was sad to look at, too. Her heavy blue eyeshadow and pink lipstick stained teeth gave Sammy little to no confidence in her expertise. The

nameplate on her desk read 'Mrs. Ranson' in bedazzled letters. Her heavily made up eyes widened at the sight of the teen.

"Oh, hello darling", she said sweetly, setting down a pile of papers, "Wasn't expecting you for another ten minutes."

Sammy shrugged, dropping down limply into the chair in front of her desk. "Early bird gets the worm, or something."

"Well then, let's jump right in", she responded perkily, smile stretched over her thin lips. She looked down at her desk, riffling through some papers before pulling one out with her name on it. "Okay, by the looks of it you're doing very well in class. Honor roll, all advanced classes. A B in English, but I'm sure you can fix that."

Sammy simply nodded along. She'd heard most of this from her teachers beforehand. However, as the woman looked through her file, the brunette noticed her brows pull together. "Is something wrong?"

Mrs. Ranson looked back up at her, slapping back on her usual smile. "Oh, just a little snag. I noticed it says here you want to be a doctor."

The teen's brows pulled together, nodding in confusion. "Yeah. What about it?"

The woman seemed to be battling something in her head, like she was bouncing between ways of trying to say something. "Well… I suppose it's just surprising, is all. You know medical school is incredibly expensive."

"I'm aware", she responded, already knowing where this was going.

"Well, with your circumstances-"

"My circumstances are fine", she huffed, the embarrassment from earlier now compounding with the deep blush that was rising up to her ears in humiliation from this woman bringing up the fact that she's Hawkins High's resident piece of poverty ridden trash.

"Perhaps it would be better if you trained to be a nurse?" Mrs. Ranson offered perkily.

"Nope", she cut off brazenly, "I'm going to be a doctor. An oncologist, to be more specific."

The older woman nodded, lips pursing in aggravating sympathy that made Sammy want to smash the novelty snow globe on the floor. "Dear, I know that it must be hard, with what happened to your mother-"

"This has nothing to do with that", Sammy snapped, glaring over at the overly made up woman, "Just tell me I'm a bright young woman, that I should look into the local community college because that's a requirement and let me be on my way."

Ranson's mouth gaped open, unsure of what to respond with. "Well I- I supposed you've covered all the bases."

"Great!" the teen piped, smile sarcastically wide on her face as she pushed herself out of the chair and made her way out of the office, leaving the woman behind in surprised silence.

Making her way back into the halls, the girl nearly ran face first into someone.

"Damn, sorry about-"

Looking up, she saw that it was only Jonathan, whose usual timid smile was stuck firmly on his face.

"Oh", she shrugged, crossing her arms over her chest, "Well, now that I know it's you, I'm not sorry."

"That tracks", the boy quipped back, "How was your conference?"

"Bullshit", she responded, tugging at his arm and falling into step beside him on their way to his locker, "Ranson suggested I should be a nurse."

"What?" he exclaimed, looking down at her, "Why would she suggest that?"

She pursed her lips, feeling her jaw tighten. "She implied that the only reason I want to pursue oncology was because of my mom."

Her friend nodded, face falling slightly. The whole town knew about her mom, what happened to her and what happened after. But he also knew Sammy didn't like to talk about it.

Jonathan shrugged, keeping the subject at bay. "Ranson's insane anyway. Have you seen her collection of cat themed teacups?"

The girl giggled, swiping hair out of her face. "I did not notice that."

"Shows how bad her judgement is", he continued, smirking down at her, "She'd be lucky to have you as an oncologist."

Her smirk grew into a real smile. She knew what her friend was doing, and she definitely appreciated it.

"Aww, you're gonna make me blush", Sammy simpered, nudging Jonathan with her shoulder, "You excited for tonight?"

The taller boy rubbed at the back of his neck, coming to a stop in front of his locker. "Yeah. But I don't have to dress like one of the characters, right?"

Sammy shrugged, stuffing her hands in her pockets. "Not this time. You get a pass because you're a virgin."

"What?" he gagged, eyes widening at the moniker.

"A Rocky virgin", she clarified, "I'm not insulting your sexual prowess. But you do have to announce your movie virginity at the show. Paint a V somewhere on your body."

He chuckled, pretend glaring at his friend. "I'm definitely not doing that."

"Aww, but I brought my lipstick for it!" Sammy faux whined, pulling the old tube of red lipstick out of her pocket and uncapping it, "Just let me do it."

"No!"

"Come on!", she laughed, reaching up and grabbing him by the jaw to try and pull his face down and paint the letter. He laughed along,

playfully trying to pull his face out of her grasp.

"Stop it!"

"Let me-"

"Would you just- just let-"

"Don't be a damn baby!"

"I'm not-"

"What the hell?" a voice called out beside them, nasal and ugly.

Both teens stopped what they were doing and turned to see none other than Tommy and Carol chortling at them. Sammy dropped her hand from her friend's face, feeling her mood drop almost immediately.

"Hey, look!", jeered Tommy, pointing out the duo to his redheaded girlfriend, "It's Psycho and Trailer Trash making out in the damn hallway!"

Well, at least the nicknames were halfway new. Carol began to cackle her sorority witch giggle, throwing her head back. "You never see one without the other these days. Think they're fucking, Tommy?"

"Oh, for sure", he laughed, "I bet he takes pictures of it, uses them to jack off."

"Shut up", Jonathan spat weakly, trying and failing to get them to lay off of Sammy in some sad form of chivalry.

Tommy laughed at his pathetic attempt at a defense and threw an arm around Jonathan, making him flinch.

"Man, I always took you for a queer", he jeered, his cologne nearly choking Jonathan, "I should be congratulating you. Hey, man, you think you could give me a few copies of those photos? I bet Trailer Park here is pretty dirty. White trash girls always are."

Carol sneered down at Sammy, her face twisted in some sort of half-

smile half-smirk. "I bet Psycho boy here is just as perverted. Probably more. Tell me, Trailer Trash, how freaky is the sex?"

Jonathan felt his face go red. He shoved his hands deeper into his jacket pockets and knocked Tommy off of his shoulder, wishing the two screeching assholes would just go away. Sammy, on the other hand, was standing stiff and angry, teeth clenched and eyes narrowed.

"I don't know, Carol", spat Sammy, feeling taller than she actually was, "How disappointing is yours? I mean, I assume Tommy here is compensating for something with this whole machismo act."

"Hey, you better watch it, bitch-"

"Tell me, Tommy", Sammy sneered, advancing on the freckled boy, "Have you ever made her orgasm? Can you even find the clit? You don't seem like you could."

"I swear to God-"

"Or maybe she was faking it for your over inflated ego? I bet she's got the sounds perfected by now. Can you even point out where the clit is on a map? Can you?"

Sammy continued to rant, occasionally pointing towards Carol's crotch with far too much vigor. Jonathan choked back a laugh, alerting the two bullies to his presence again. Carol's face started to resemble a tomato and she began stuttering half assed retorts, all but proving what Sammy had just said. Tommy was red in the face with rage. He started to advance on Sammy. Jonathan quickly stood in front of her, ready to take the blows before Carol grabbed onto Tommy's jacket, holding him back.

"Babe, let's just go", she said, sneering over at the two losers, "Leave these two freaks to their perverted fucking."

"I'd gladly welcome the privacy", the brunette spat back at them, flipping them off as the stomped away, "Assholes."

She felt her jaw tighten in anger as she watched them leave, the silence they left behind incredibly welcome.

"I'm sorry", Jonathan said quietly beside her.

"For what?", Sammy inquired distractedly, muffling her words.

She turned back to look at him, noticing his pale face had become long and sunken. "I mean", he sighed sadly, running a hand through his hair, "I know I'm dragging you down to my freak depths or whatever, and Tommy and Carol are giving you a hard time now and-"

"Jonathan, I'm gonna stop you right there", the brunette interjected, brandishing her finger in his face, "I'm not being 'dragged down' to your level, I am right where I want to be. You are my friend. That's not up for debate. And besides, who gives a shit about Tommy and Carol. They are textbook examples of peaking in high school. They aren't even original about it. I mean, c'mon. Psycho and Trailer Trash? They make us sound like the world's worst crime fighting duo."

"Hey", he muttered with a smile, fingers tapping nervously on his elbow, "We wouldn't be that bad at solving crimes."

"Yeah", Sammy giggled, leaning forward and pointing towards the locker that housed his camera, "You could document the evidence. Take photos of the scene."

"And you could examine the bodies", he joked, also leaning towards the brunette in front of him.

"Perfect practice for med school", she jested.

Sammy felt her cheeks lift up, dimples on full display as she properly smiled for the first time that day. And Jonathan seemed strangely soft, like he was fuzzy around the edges. His lips quirked up in that way she'd only seen him do.

"You're my best friend too, you know", he said softly.

Sammy's smile softened, shrugging and trying to wave him off. "I never said best friend."

Jonathan chuckled, allowing himself to really smile. "You didn't have

to."

She looked at him for a few moments, considering him before lifting her hand out towards him.

"Psycho and Trailer Trash forever", she stated seriously, readying her hand for a shake.

Jonathan smiled wide, placing his hand firmly in hers. His hands were surprisingly soft.

"Psycho and Trailer Trash forever."

A/N: Guess who's back, bitches! Also great thanks for all of you who voiced your opinions about the pairing of this story. I'm going to continue it as a Jonathan/OC story and keep developing every character and will see what happens. Things may change in the future based on some plotting I've been doing, but it's gonna be a fun ride.

9. November 3, 1983

6 Months Later

Sammy wasn't sure if smoke was supposed to be coming off the chili, but she was confident it wasn't supposed to smell this bad. The smell was filling up the whole house and she was scrambling around the kitchen in a vain attempt at controlling the pot of boiling goo she'd managed to burn.

"Goddamn it!" she whimpered, clumsily trying to fan the smoke out of the kitchen window, "I need some help in here!"

All four boys came sprinting into the kitchen, all at varying levels of panic. Each one was yelling over the other, trying to tell her what she should do. Mike was yelling at her to turn the burner off, while Lucas kept complaining about the smell and telling her to open the windows.

Dustin, ever the sadist, stared at the mess with a mix of horror and delight. "Holy shit."

"Watch your fucking language, Henderson!" the teen scolded, barely paying attention as she tried to wave away the smoke, "We need to get the smoke out!"

Sammy felt truly sorry for the boys in this moment. They were not only having to suffer through eating her food, but having to smell it being made. Jonathan and Joyce were coming back from their shifts at work and she'd been tasked with watching Will since seven in the morning. Of course, the rest of the Party had shown up demanding a rather volatile game of Clue. She'd become Will's go-to babysitter whenever she didn't have a shift at work. Usually she brought something from either Benny's or Jenny's, but she'd had no shifts that morning, forcing her to try and make something resembling food.

Will came running in, hair flopping in his face with a large wet rag in one hand and an electric fan in the other. "I've got it!"

The brunette could hear Will plugging in the fan and aiming it

towards the window as she snatched the wet rag out of his hands. Lucas threw the window open, dropping back onto the ground with a thump. Carefully, she wrapped the burning hot handle of the pot in the rag and carried it over to the sink, dropping it in with a loud clang.

"I think the bottom half is burnt", Sammy grumbled, stretching her hand and checking to see if she'd burned herself, "It's gonna stink for a while."

"Yeah, that's kinda obvious", the darker skinned boy commented bluntly.

"I don't need that attitude, Lucas", she shot back.

"Yeah", Mike backed her up gallantly, "Our mission is to help her, not attack her horrible cooking skills."

Sammy couldn't help the rolling of her eyes. "Thanks for that, Mike."

"We've got some candles in the bathroom", Will called out over the buzz of the fan, "We can try to use them to get the smell out. The labels say they smell like an ocean breeze."

"Great idea, little man", she grunted, flipping off the burner and letting out a cough from all the smoke, "Oceans are nice. Ocean's are better than burnt chilli. Do you, uh- do you think you're mom's gonna be pissed at me?"

She glanced over at the boy, his wide eyes sympathetically looking up at her. "Don't give me that look."

"There's no look", he insisted gently, eyes flicking over to the brown mass of chilli in the sink, "I just… think Jonathan forgot to tell mom you couldn't cook."

"Ms. Byers is never pissed about anything", Mike tried to reassure her, "She'll probably just feel sorry for you."

Sammy ran her hands over her face nervously. "I think that might be worse."

"How much would you pay me to eat this?"

The brunette dropped her hands from her face to see Dustin and Lucas standing at the sink with a ladle full of burnt chilli in Dustin's hands. Bits of thick brown goo fell down the side and dripped mercilessly onto the floor.

"Don't you dare, Dustin", Sammy demanded.

"Three bucks", Lucas cut her off, an impish smile on his face.

"Lucas, do not encourage this", she cut in again, snatching the ladle from Dustin's grip, "I am not adding food poisoning to my growing list of failures tonight."

"You're not a failure", Will insisted sweetly.

A small smile lifted its way onto Sammy's face. She ran her fingers through the boy's hair and ruffled it a bit. He smiled up at her kindly as the other boys continued to talk over each other. Unfortunately, the mildly peaceful moment was broken by the headlights making their way through the window. Sammy's heart skipped a beat as she realized they were about to be caught.

The boys noticed, too. Each one sprung into action immediately. Dustin filled the ugly pot with soap and water while Lucas ran towards the front door to try and buy them some time. Mike and Will waved their hands around like maniacs to try and fan the smoke out. Sammy herself ran towards the door in an early attempt at an apology. The screen door screeched as she stumbled onto the old wooden porch. Joyce was standing my her car, looking utterly confused as Lucas was already in the middle of a rushed lie about where the smell must have come from.

"-and this huge stinkbug just came out of nowhere, and Sammy tried to fight it off with the broom, but then it just, uh- released this smell all over the kitchen-"

"Joyce, I'm so sorry!" Sammy cut him off, addressing the confused woman in a long ramble, "I was trying to make Will an early lunch, then the other boys showed up and I adjusted the recipe to feed them

all. And I guess I got the math wrong and now the whole kitchen smells and I'm so sorry I'm trying to fix it and-"

It was the giggling that cut her off. Joyce stood by her car, leaning on her open door and laughing to herself with a satisfied smile on her face. Sammy had no clue why she was doing that, and it put her a little on edge.

She took a deep breath, keeping her eyes on the teen girl with a gentle smile. "I thought Jonathan was exaggerating when he said you couldn't cook. But based on the fact that I can smell it from here, I'd say he was telling the truth."

The curly haired girl felt her face fall, shoulders slumping. "You can smell it from here?"

"I could smell it down the driveway."

Sammy swore she would melt through the floor in embarrassment. Maybe if she shifted her weight just enough the rotten wood would collapse beneath her and give her at least a few seconds of reprieve. Instead she watched dumbly as Joyce climbed the creaky stairs, giving her a quick squeeze on the shoulder before making her way into the house, Sammy trailing behind her like a sad puppy.

The sight they were met with was even worse than Sammy had left it. Mike, Will and Dustin were all frozen, staring at the three others who'd just entered, surrounded by what looked like eight candles all lit around the chilli like a vigil. Some of it was dripping down the edge of the sink, meaning they'd tried to dump it down the drain and failed. It was a scene straight out of Lord of the Flies.

Sammy stared in horror as the woman beside her remained silent. All three boys looked like deer in headlights, stuck in frozen positions, afraid to break the quiet. Unsurprisingly, it was Dustin who decided to speak first.

"At least you're not cooking at our campaign tonight."

He was hit by an immediate punch from Mike, who started swearing at his friend. "We do not insult members of the Party, shitface!"

"How am I the bad guy here?" he lisped back desperately.

"Nobody's the bad guy", Joyce responded kindly, stepping into the kitchen and immediately grabbing hold of a sponge.

Sammy noticed, springing into action and snatching the sponge out of the woman's hands. "Oh no, you're not cleaning this. It's my mess."

"Please", the older woman brushed her off, "You've been watching these boys for almost eight hours. I can take care of this."

"No, you've been working all morning-"

"Samantha", Joyce said seriously, though the edges of her mouth still turned up, "I insist. Jonathan will be back tonight anyway to make up for this. Besides, he would kill me if I didn't send you home in time to get some homework done before your shift tomorrow morning."

The teen rolled her eyes, relinquishing the sponge to Joyce. "You can tell Jonathan he has no say in my sleep schedule."

"He's just trying to take care of you", the woman pointed out, glancing at Sammy, "And he also told me to tell you he's going to rent Carrie for your movie night tonight because, and I'm quoting him here, 'an angry girl covered in blood seemed like your thing'."

Sammy chuckled, nodding along. "Yeah, he's got me there. When he gets home tell him I'll bring popcorn. Uncooked, of course."

"Thank God", Joyce replied, scrubbing rather efficiently at the pot, cleaning it much faster than Sammy ever could, "I'll tell him before I leave for my next shift. Now you go home, okay? Have some fun. You deserve it."

"Wait, no!" Will protested, "She was going to help me with my character profile!"

The teen kneeled down in front of the smaller boy, ruffling his hair good naturedly. "You've already got your character, Will The Wise. You just need to figure out your stats. I'm sure Mike is more than happy to help you out there."

The other boy nodded and gave Will a thumbs up, confirming Sammy quickly. The brunette nodded again at the little boy, pushing herself back up onto her feet. "I promise I'll be back here tomorrow to hear all about the campaign."

"It'll be legendary!" Mike bragged, "I'll show you my notes afterwards."

Sammy chukled, shooting Mike a thumbs up. "I'm a lucky girl."

Will shot his friend an annoyed look, quickly turning back to the teen in front of him. "But- uh, you could help us finish the game now! Yeah, we're having trouble figuring out what the weapon is, and you're smart enough to figure it out.

Squinting at the boy, Sammy resisted the urge to roll her eyes. "Are you trying to keep me here until Jonathan gets back?"

His eyes widened, trying to look innocent. "What? No! No, I'd never."

"Because it seems like you're trying to stall me until your brother gets home", she pointed out, mildly amused. Will had been playing this game for months now, trying to get Sammy and Jonathan alone late at night in some futile attempt to get them to fall in love. He apparently thought moonlight would help.

"Will, just let her go home", Joyce cut in, waving away the boy's schemes, "You can figure out how to get them alone later. Besides, my plan to lock them in a closet is still in progress."

"There's no romance to that, mom!"

"Can I point out that you're basically prostituting your brother?" Mike gagged, ever disgusted with the idea of Sammy and Jonathan as a couple.

"Stop trying to set us up", Sammy commanded, snatching up her backpack from the kitchen table and turning towards the door, "I really should head home. I've got way too much homework to deal with. You guys have fun with your campaign today." She turned to Joyce, sending her a wave. "Again, I'm sorry about the kitchen."

"Nothing worse than anything I've made." the woman shrugged kindly, setting aside the magically clean pot. Sammy shrugged on her jacket, making sure to bundle on an extra flannel as she did.

"That's a lie and we both know it."

Waving at everyone in the group one last time, she skipped out of the old house and into the yard. The patchy grass crunched under her feet, bits of frozen dew making her careful to not step too clumsily. She'd face planted one too many times in this yard over the past month. The November frost cold was getting harsher, colder. It bit into her face almost as soon as she stepped out of the warm house. It was so cloudy that it was practically nighttime, no sunlight to be seen or spoken of.

Snatching up her bike and shaking off any frost, Sammy swung her leg over and pedalled her way out of the yard. The bike wavered under her for a second or two before she got her balance, pushing herself back towards her house.

The ride was familiar, well worn. She could point out each individual tree if she were quizzed on it. It started to feel shorter the more she rode along. She'd read somewhere that trips felt shorter because your brain filled in the familiar gaps you might have had to actively see the first few times. Whatever the case, it was a pleasant time, even with the cold wind biting her face relentlessly.

Of course, her first stop brought her closer to the suburban side of the town. Houses got bigger and cleaner, gardens more manicured and green as opposed to her open fielded, ramshackled residence. She felt strange in such a pristine place, like they could smell her coming. Like the houses themselves knew she didn't belong anywhere near them.

With a squeal of her rusting gears, Sammy braked to a stop in front of a large, perfectly clean house. Letting the bike drop to the ground out of reflex, she left it in the garden as she made her way towards the large wooden doors and knocked harshly. It only took a few moments for her to hear footsteps reach her and the lock click open.

Throwing the door open was none other than a dishevelled looking

Steve, hair askew and donning a pair of sweatpants and basketball t-shirt. He squinted at her, face somewhere between confusion and annoyance. Almost as quickly, it shifted into a leering smile.

"Is the sexual tension finally getting to you, Gorgeous?" he joked easily, sweeping his hair back in an attempt to keep his usual look intact.

"In your dreams, Harrington", Sammy rolled her eyes, shifting her feet nervously beneath her, "I came with information. A deal's a deal, remember?"

"It's two in the morning", he said, squinting down at her.

"So?"

"How did you know my parents weren't home?"

Sammy snorted. "You're a Harrington. We all know your parents are never actually in Hawkins."

"Yeah, you've got a point", he conceded, nodding inside.

"And I've got the topics for next week's physics test", she shot back with a shrug, "Take it or leave it."

It looked like Steve was trying to look like he was making a decision, but Sammy knew she had him. With a practiced smirk, he gestured inside dramatically. "In you go, Thompson."

It shouldn't have been as difficult as it was to step into Steve's house. She'd been inside at least once a week since the start of the semester. But the floors simply felt different. They didn't creak beneath her or stick with splinters the way hers did at home. The walls were immaculate, with professionally shot family photos hung up along the halls. It all felt so alien, far away from her. She definitely didn't like it.

Somehow, it seemed that Steve always caught onto her discomfort. He was nothing if not perceptive. "How about we take this outside. I've got some fantastically comfortable pool chairs."

"Whatever."

He lead her through the kitchen- with marble counter tops to really drive the whole rich thing home- and out the sliding doors towards a backyard with a huge pool. It lit up the yard with an otherworldly blue glow. The place felt foreign, like she could sense all the parties that happened here, all the people who didn't know her name.

"Nice decor," she provided, eyeing the taller boy, "Looks like your mom redecorated."

"Mom found out about dear old dad's latest secretary, so she got spendy with his credit card," Steve responded, only half proud while pointing towards the plush pool chairs, "Take a seat and we'll discuss."

The two teens made their way over, Steve dropping down onto the chair and laying back lazily. Sammy sat straight up, facing him and shifting around on her ass with discomfort.

"You can relax, you know", Steve said, pulling out a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, "Not like it's your first time here."

"I feel like a villain in a weird rapey geek movie", she responded, crossing her arms over her chest.

"You're not a weird geek villain," he reassured her lazily, "You'r just here to make sure I do my homework and let me tell you that I got Nancy Wheeler to make out with me."

"Can I point out that you didn't make her do anything, shit-brain?"

Steve snorted, a lock of his carefully styled hair falling over his forehead. "Definitely no force involved. Not my style. Your feminist standards are met, Gorgeous."

Nodding, Sammy settled back into the pool chair slightly. "Okay then. Let's get started on physics."

Soon enough, her house came into view. Always the same, always just as run down as it was the day before. Nothing changed.

The bike screeched to a stop before she dumped it onto the ground with a clatter. Her backpack bounced against the back of her hips as Sammy made her way inside the cold house. They didn't have the money for heating this year.

"Hey, Dad", she called out casually, "I'm home."

Nothing.

Normally she'd hear a grumble or a half-slurred excited greeting, but nothing. Just silence and an echo. That was never good. Silence always meant bail money, money she didn't have to spare right now.

"Dad?", she called out again, stepping through the carpeted halls and peeking into his bedroom, "Seriously, please be home."

The room, unfortunately, was empty. Sighing and rubbing anxiously at her nose, Sammy looked around the room for any sign of where her father might be. The room smelled, with clothes ridden around the floor and old beer cans that hadn't quite made it to the trash yet. She noted the bundle of crumpled cigarette packs tucked just under his mattress, poorly hidden. It made her want to gag. Making her way around the bed, she noticed a few of her mom's old things piled up in the corner carefully. Some of her ripped up jeans, an old band tee advertising The Beatles, two Beatles records and a Kinks record. In the middle of it all was her old bass, a little dusty but still recognizable with its array of old garage band stickers.

Just as quickly as she'd looked, Sammy looked away from the sad little shrine. All it did was make her miserable. Seeing that it was clear her father wasn't here, she made her way into the kitchen towards the phone. The place was fairly untouched, seeing as neither occupants knew how to use anything there. Before she could even dial in a number, the phone started to ring.

Quickly, Sammy picked it up and pressed it to her ear. "Hello?"

"Hey."

Sammy didn't mean for her face to drop, but it did. On the other end of the line was Jonathan, not her father.

"Hey, Psycho", she sighed, leaning down onto the counter.

"Well, don't sound too happy to hear from me", he quipped on the other end of the line.

Sammy ran her hands through her hair. "No, I'm glad to hear from you. It's just that I can't find my dad."

Her friend was quiet for a second, and she could tell that he was trying to figure out if she wanted to talk about it or not. She definitely hoped he guessed right.

"Well, I just called to tell you I have to cancel movie night tonight."

He guessed right.

Sammy groaned, already upset by the news. She'd been looking forward to their weekly movie night. "Come on, man!"

"I'm sorry!", he responded quickly, "Someone just asked me to cover their shift tonight and I figured my mom could use the extra money."

Dropping her head to the cool counter, the brunette sighed dramatically. But she understood, unfortunately. "Yeah, I get it. Get that money, buddy. We'll reschedule."

"Thank you so much. I'm really sorry."

"I expect to still be watching Carrie", she pointed out quickly.

Jonathan chuckled on the other end of the line. She could imagine his shit eating grin. "Of course. Hey, I gotta go. My boss is about to make the rounds again."

"Don't get caught", she grinned, already reaching up to the phone to hang up, "Have a good night, dumbass."

"See you later, Trailer Trash."

Hanging up, Sammy lifted her head back up off the counter and put her fingers on the dial. Putting the receiver to her ear, Sammy quickly dialed the number for her dad's favorite bar. The ringing

went on as she nervously drummed her fingers against the dirty counter beside her.

Finally, the line clicked and Ryan's ugly voice came through.

"Yeah, what d'ya want?"

"Is that a proper way to greet a potential customer?"

She could hear him groan over the line, a simple victory in the ongoing battle between the rodent-like old man and the teen.

"You're daddy ain't here, kid" he stated simply, not caring to talk more than he had to.

"Then where is he?", Sammy inquired, keeping her voice measured.

"Who the fuck knows?"

"Come on", she pleaded tiredly, already feeling a headache coming on, "You've gotta know something."

The old man grumbled, and she could picture his ugly rat face scowling at her. "Why should I care what Greg does in his time. So long as he's not damaging my property again, I don't care where the fuck he is."

"Can you at least tell me if he's at the sheriff's?"

The line was quiet for a moment as Sammy rubbed her temples anxiously, waiting for an answer. Instead, she heard the man sigh on the other end, clearly incredibly annoyed with her.

"He's somewhere", he snapped, "Haven't heard anything about him getting arrested. Maybe he's off getting pissed somewhere new."

Feeling her eyelids drop and fingers twitch, she quickly decided that maybe she didn't really want to know any details right now. Instead of responding, she quickly hung up the phone and placed both hands on her forehead. This was too much shit to deal with in one go. So she decided to deal with it later. She made her way to her room, feet dragging as she went and leaving a trail in the carpet. She needed

sleep right now. Whatever else happened would happen anyway.

10. The Vanishing of Will Byers

The next morning started the way it always did: murky sunlight and a screeching alarm clock. Sammy groaned as she smacked the offending alarm off, her mind still half asleep. She could feel her hair sticking to the drool on her cheek, but she had no energy to actually try and move it. With an amount of effort that felt excessive, Sammy threw herself out of bed, feet making a dull thump on the carpeted ground as she made her way to her feet. The floorboards groaned beneath her, stepping around the stray t-shirts scattered around the ground. She maneuvered herself around the mess on her floor towards her closet.

Everything was quiet as she quickly shoved herself into a pair of old jeans and a t-shirt that happened didn't have any holes in it. She caught a glance of herself in the mirror, hair tangled on top of her head so badly she looked like she had a bird's nest on her head. Brushing it was going to be a nightmare. Sighing, she snatched her brush off of her nightstand and made her way into the hallway.

The house was still silent, no sounds of snoring or movement. A telltale sign that she was alone. No part of Sammy wanted to think about where her father might be, so she dragged her brush painfully through her hair and trudged her way to the kitchen. She knew she had a few old Eggo's in the freezer she could heat up without screwing it up too bad. She quickly popped them in the toaster and leaned against the counter, trying to pull the last tangle out of her hair. Then, annoyingly breaking the silence, the phone started ringing. Figuring it was her dad calling to have her pick him up, Sammy groaned and trudged over to the other side of kitchen, quickly picked up.

"Where are you?" she grumbled, rubbing lazily at her eyes to get the sleep out, feeling a few stray hairs from her brush stick to her cheek.

"What?"

Her hands froze over her right eye, realizing it wasn't her father on the other end of the line. "Jonathan? What's up?"

Normally, he'd ask if her father was home or make sure she'd gotten enough sleep. Overprotective shit like that. But something felt off.

"I, uh…", he stuttered, putting Sammy on edge, "I was just wondering if Will told you if he was staying at someone's house last night."

"No", she responded curiously, "He just said he was going to Mike's. Is everything okay?"

"Yeah!", he blurted out unconvincingly, "I'm- I'm sure he's just gone to school early or something. Just wanted to check."

Her friend's voice was higher than usual, faster. He only sounded like that when he lied, and he was a terrible liar. The line frizzed out like he was moving to hang up, but something was making the brunette nervous.

"Jonathan, what's really going on?" Sammy rambled quickly, trying to keep his attention before the line went dead, "You sound really freaked out. Is Will okay?"

Her friend didn't respond, instead letting the line stay quiet. But she could hear him breathing, confirming that he was still on the phone.

"Jonathan," she repeated urgently, "Tell me Will's okay."

There was some sort of static, like he was breathing hard, before he spoke again. It sent a jolt right up her spine. Her body tightened, waiting for any sort of information to confirm the worst. "Will didn't come home last night."

"What?", she squeaked, suddenly completely awake, "How- do you know where-"

"No, I don't", he cut in frantically, "And I have no idea where he might be. The Wheeler's said he left around eight last night and no one's seen him since."

"Okay- okay, don't freak", she tried to reassure him, running through every possible place he might be, "Have you checked Castle Byers? Or maybe he snuck out to the art store- he's done that before."

"We're checking", Jonathan sputtered, "I'll make sure we check the art store. Thanks for that. I'll- uh, I'll tell you when we find him-"

"You think I'm just gonna wait around to hear about this?", she cut him off, already reaching over and snatching her backpack off of the chair over the counter, "I'm coming over."

"No, you have school-"

"Don't pull that shit with me", dragging her pack behind her, Sammy quickly threw it over her shoulder, "I'm already on my way."

"Sammy-"

Before her friend could protest, Sammy slammed the phone back into the receiver and ran out of the house, Eggo's forgotten. Her hair flew behind her as she jumped onto her bike, pedalling as hard as she could out of her lawn and down the road. She barely even paid attention to the patches of ice on the concrete, nearly falling face first and knocking her teeth out several times. Instead she focused on keeping her breathing even, panic at bay.

There was no way Will was just pulling a prank. He wasn't that kind of kid. Dustin, maybe. Mike would probably do something like this. But not Will. At the very least he would have called and told her so she could tell Jonathan or Joyce and keep them from worrying. Something had to be wrong. Very very wrong. It made her gut twist up in knots, bile already burning her throat.

The ride felt longer than usual, unbearably long. And halfway through, Sammy realized she'd completely forgotten her coat. The air was starting to get painful against her skin but she just pushed harder to get to they Byers' faster.

She could feel her skin tighten and fingers turn an ugly shade of blue as she finally pulled into the yard, dropping her bike unceremoniously beneath her before running up the porch and into the house. She threw herself into the living room, floor screaming beneath her as her heavy footsteps slammed against the old wood.

"Jonathan! Joyce!"

She could hear someone scrambling from a room not too far away. She could hear Joyce yelling something somewhere. Her backpack dropped onto the ground with a heavy thud as she made her way towards the noise, nearly slamming straight into Jonathan as he came running in through the hall.

"Anything- has anything changed?" Sammy asked, out of breath and breathing hard.

"No," Jonathan responded quickly, grabbing hold of her shoulders and holding onto her desperately, "Nothing. We checked everywhere this morning. Mom's trying to call my dad because the police said-"

"You're going to the police?"

The thought of police searches and Hopper coming in made it all feel more dangerous, like Will was further away than she'd thought.

The thought clearly went through Jonathan's head, too. His breathing was heavier, like he was putting effort into keeping the breaths normal. His body was stiff, tight around the edges. Trying her best to keep herself in check, Sammy gently grabbed hold of his shoulders and looked seriously up at him.

"What can I do to help?"

Her friend swallowed hard, eyes flicking up to the front door. "We're just waiting here, just in case Will shows up. Then we're- uh, we're gonna start making missing posters."

"Okay," she nodded, already tugging Jonathan towards the couch, "We'll start on the posters. I'll find a good picture, you start drawing it out. We'll just- just stay calm."

Instead of moving, Jonathan just stood and stared at her. "If we start making posters…"

Realizing what her friend meant, Sammy quickly made her way back over to her friend. She planted her hands firmly on his shoulders, staring him straight in the eyes. "It's just a precaution. It doesn't mean anything other than you're smart enough to make sure things move quickly just in case. You need to stay calm, okay?"

"Yeah," Jonathan croaked, swallowing hard and nodding his head, "Yeah, you're right."

The brunette smiled up, the smallest bit of relief running through her. "I'm always right. Now get the poster material."

The two teens separated, each going off to find what they needed. Sammy went straight to the hallway where all the Byers' family photos hung.

Will's absence felt heavy in the house. His crayons and colored pencils still littered every corner of the hall. He'd never been the best at picking up after himself when he started drawing. It made Sammy's throat feel tight, like she couldn't breathe.

Shaking it off, she quickly started taking down pictures of Will from the wall. Ones that were just of him, a few of him with Joyce. She didn't want anyone confusing Jonathan for Will, so she made sure her friend was in none of the photo's she chose. Her fingers stopped, however, over a family photo Jonathan had let her take only a few months ago. He'd just bought his Pentax camera, and Joyce had insisted the first photo taken should be of him. He'd obviously protested. All three Byers' had broken into a joyful argument about what photo he should take. While they were all bickering, Sammy had quietly grabbed the camera off the counter and snapped a picture of them in action. It was a little blurry, not nearly as good as anything Jonathan could do. But all three members of the family were smiling, Joyce gesturing wildly while Will was halfway into a jump. Jonathan's head was turning towards the camera, smile wide on his face as he shouted at her to put the camera down.

The image made Sammy's lips perk up slightly. Her chest felt tight, but she quickly shook it off. Will wasn't gone. He was just missing.

"Sammy?"

The girl turned her head to see a distressed Joyce walking towards her. She dropped her hand from the photos and walked up to the older woman, immediately throwing her arms around her. Joyce responded immediately, squeezing her arms tight around Sammy's middle and sniffling.

"I- I don't know where he could be," Joyce stammered into the younger girl's shoulder, "I've been calling everyone, going everywhere. He could be hurt or-"

"Will is a smart kid," Sammy cut her off, keeping her hold on Joyce, "Way smarter than anyone gives him credit for. If he's really lost, he'll know what to do. We're gonna find him, Joyce."

"Shouldn't you be at school?" Joyce croaked, pulling back slightly, "It started a few hours ago, and I know-"

"Screw school," Sammy shrugged, keeping her hands on the older woman's shoulders, "Will matters way more to me than an English quiz."

A watery smile spread over Joyce's face. She reached up and pushed back some of Sammy's hair off of her face. For a moment, Joyce felt like a mother. The gesture made the younger girl's chest ache. It was a little more painful than comforting.

"You keep making calls," Sammy said, trying to cover up the shake in her voice, "Jonathan and I are making posters. We'll go to the copy place then start putting them up if he doesn't come back in the next few hours."

Joyce nodded, her brown eyes boring into Sammy's. "Yeah, that's… that's smart, sweetie. But Lonnie won't pick up the phone, and some bimbo keeps screening the calls and-"

"Guys!"

Joyce and Sammy nearly jumped at the sound of Jonathan's voice. They turned to see him staring out the window, face creased up and worried. He turned and looked over at his friend, shoulders tense.

"Police."

Sammy felt her whole body tense up. "Is Will with them?"

Her friend slowly shook his head. The sound of the door opening cut through the quiet house like a gunshot. It pushed the women into action, both Joyce and Sammy walking into the front room. Three

cops were there, Hopper and two deputies Sammy had seen once in a while. They'd arrested her father on more than one occasion. The taller one seemed to recognize her, his eyes rolling. Hopper, however, took notice and his face went soft. Sammy's eyes travelled down to see what was in his grip and her stomach dropped.

"That's Will's bike," Jonathan said softly, pointing shakily at the bicycle held up by the police chief.

"Yeah," Hopper responded, his voice low as he lay the bike down against the kitchen table, "We found it out in the woods."

"What? Just lying there?" Joyce exclaimed, her voice high and shaking. She stepped closer to the chief, who looked incedibly uncomfortable with the situation.

"Yeah," he muttered again, eyes landing on one of the cops beside him, "Cal?"

The cop- Cal- seemed to know what to do as he stepped out of the room and down the hall. Jonathan was standing shock still beside Sammy, nervousness practically radiating off of him. Quietly, she reached out her hand and wrapped it around his wrist, as if that could anchor him. He responded quickly, sliding his hand up and grasping hers tightly.

Joyce kept in step with Hopper, her eyes big and terrified. "Was there blood on it or-"

"No, nothing like that," he quickly cut her off, turning to the other deputy, "Phil?"

The taller man nodded his head and went in the same direction as Cal. Both teens watched him saunter through the house, nose wrinkling in haughty disgust at the state of the place. The boy held even tighter to Sammy's hand, leaning down towards her ear.

"What are they looking for?" he whispered shakily, "There can't be anything in the house, could there?"

Shaking her head, Sammy gave his hand a squeeze. "I don't know. I'll check it out."

With a nod, they let go of each other's sweaty hands and Sammy made her way down the hall. She could hear the two deputies talking, clearly in the same room. It didn't make sense. Why would they be looking in the same place if they were searching for evidence? Her gut began to twist in knots when Sammy realized they were searching Jonathan's room.

Quietly avoiding any squeaky floorboards, the curly haired girl stepped up beside the door and out of sight. She kept her ears open, listening to the two men inside.

"The fuck is all this?"

Sammy recognized that as Phil, his voice rather distinctive and high. Her brows pulled together, confused at what the hell he was talking about.

"Kid's a fucking weirdo," Cal responded drily, "I'd put my money on him."

Heat flooding through her face, Sammy pressed herself further towards the door. What they hell did they think? Jonathan would kill Will? Her face twisted into a scowl at the thought of anyone accusing her friend of such a thing.

"Check this one out," Phil snickered, his rat-like voice grating on Sammy's ears, "He looks like a goddamn tranny."

"Looks like we found his next victim."

Finally having heard enough, Sammy stomped through the door and drew the attention of the cops. Both of their heads whipped around, their doughy faces slack and caught off guard. The girl could feel the tips of her ears heat up with anger after seeing what they were pointing at.

Plucked from the dozens of photos that decorated his wall, the taller cop's fingers were pinching the one from the last time Sammy had taken Jonathan to Rocky Horror. Her face and chest were carefully smeared with gold and silver glitter, her poorly put together Columbia costume clinging to her body. Jonathan had been dressed

up as Frank n' Furter, the blue dress and pearls number. She'd even convinced him to wear makeup. It was shakily executed, since neither of them was particularly good at makeup. But both of them had their arms around each other, mouths wide and smiling at the camera mid-laugh.

"Are you done in here?" Sammy griped, feet planted firmly beneath her, "Or do you want to throw around another slur or two?"

The taller cop dropped the photo to his side, eyes flicking over her patronizingly. "Miss, we're just looking around for evidence-"

"Well, you're not going to find much in here," she shot back, "In case you forgot to do your job, Jonathan has an alibi. He was at work. Our manager watches us the entire time from his car like a pervert, so you can double check with him. Now how about you actually start looking for Will."

Cal eyed her suspiciously. "You seem to know a lot about his whereabouts. Maybe you could-"

"That's enough, Cal."

Sammy's hair whipped around as she turned towards the voice speaking behind her. Hopper stood in the doorway, his face heavy and annoyed. He eyed the two deputies with distaste. "Quit harrassing the kid and search the house."

Turning her head, she watched as the two men seemed to battle between mouthing off and doing what they were told. The latter won out. A smirk crawled over her face as she watched them stomp out of the room like petulant children. She even sent them a wave, earning her two very angry looks.

"You really shouldn't piss them off," Hopper sighed, drawing Sammy's attention, "They're too dull to focus on more than one theory at a time. You don't want to go up on their list."

"They can kiss my ass," Sammy grumbled, looking up at the chief earnestly, "Have you found anything?"

Something flicked over Hopper's face, something tight and uncertain.

The teen's brows pulled together, keeping her eyes level with his, challenging him to leave her out of the loop. He matched her gaze, seemingly almost impressed. He huffed a breath out, rubbing his neck.

"We're putting together a search party," he said gruffly, "I'd say you should stay out of it but you've never listened to me."

Her stomach dropped, plummeting all the way into the earth. The girl's eyes widened, throat closing over the words that seemed unable to pass her lips. A search party. That meant something was wrong. Will really was missing. Her breath felt too hot in her chest, too heavy for her system to take. Taking in a rattling breath, Sammy raised her eyes to Hopper's.

"You're right," she croaked, "I'm not listening to you. I'll be there tonight."

Without waiting for a response, Sammy pushed past Hopper and made her way towards the hallway. She came to a stop in front of the phone, ripping it off the receiver and quickly dialing the school's number. It rang a few times before the vice principal picked up.

"Hawkins High," she groaned, her voice groaning under the weight of her chronic chain smoking.

"Hey Linda," Sammy said as steadily as she could, pressing the phone tight against her ear, "Is there a way you can get a volunteer group together for a search party tonight?"

"Depends," she replied, the slightest twinge of worry in her voice, "Who're you looking for?"

"Will Byers."

There was a silence on the other end of the line. Sammy's breath still felt too heavy, her head swimming with too little oxygen.

"I'll make an announcement," Linda finally replied firmly, "Anything else I can do?"

She was about to say no, hang up and go straight to Joyce and

Jonathan. However, an idea picked at the back of her brain. She opened her mouth, unsure of what she was about to ask. "Can you put me through to the library?"

"Uh, sure," Linda replied uncertainly, a few clicks sending her call over to her requested area.

"Hello?" Damian, the librarian greeted.

"Hey Damian," Sammy huffed, pressing her free hand against the wall, "Can you get Steve on the phone?"

"Finally," the man groaned, "The poor boy's been waiting for you to come teach him basic math for the past twenty minutes."

"Yeah, please just get him," she responded half-impatiently.

The librarian's voice was muffled as he called for Steve. The line crackled with shifting grips and new breath.

"What's up, Gorgeous?" Steve inquired, "Haven't seen you around today, and I thought-"

"Will's missing," Sammy cut in, no time for pleasantries, "There's a search party tonight"

She could practically see the older boy's mouth gaping open. He never quite knew what to do in awkward situations. "I- uh, I'm sorry?"

She pressed her hand harder into the wall, chest tight. "Don't be sorry. Get your popular asshole friends to sign up for the search party."

"Why am I doing that?" he asked stupidly, his voice practically making her want to slam her fist into the wall.

"Because if your popular asshole friends do it, half of the school will follow."

"I don't know if I can-"

"Please," Sammy begged, voice cracking over the words in a desperate haste to get them out, "We've got to find him. He's just a kid."

The line crackled with the sound of Steve sighing, though his breath sounded tight like hers. Her chest swelled full of half hope, half fear as he continued his silence. He had to say yes. He had to help.

"Okay. Yes, I can make that happen."

Sammy's breath practically fell out of her chest. Her body ducked under the relief, hair falling into her face as she did. "Thank you-thank you so much!"

The phone shifted against his skin, making his voice muffle. "I kinda owe you one, don't I?"

Without waiting for a follow up, she quickly hung up the phone and ran into the main room. Jonathan and Joyce were huddled together with Hopper trying to talk to them about the search party. Sammy's slapping footsteps drew their attention as she bounded into the room. Jonathan's wide eyes bore into hers.

"What's going on?" he asked quietly, hair falling in his face.

Sammy took another rattling breath, pushing her own wild hair out of her face. "I think I just got half of Hawkins High to join the search party."